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## Refashioning Old Clothes: Secondhand Fashion, Meaning, and Liquid Modern Consumption

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Refashioning Old Clothes:  
Secondhand Fashion, Meaning, and Liquid Modern Consumption

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of Social Sciences  
University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Keeley M. Buehler  
June 2010  
Advisor: Daniel Lair

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Title: Refashioning Old Clothes: Secondhand Fashion, Meaning, and Liquid Modern Consumption

Advisor: Daniel Lair

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### **Abstract**

This study takes a critical look at consumption in liquid modernity as it plays out in secondhand shops. Interviews with secondhand shop owners and shoppers demonstrate that secondhand fashion has the potential to promote individuality and foster relationships, ultimately encouraging a reflexive approach to consumption. It also becomes clear that secondhand shoppers are more concerned with how they consume than what they consume. Secondhand shoppers situate how they approach consuming as a facet of their identity that qualifies them as expert shoppers. In addition, shoppers are aware that how they use secondhand fashion is an opportunity for individuality. Shop owners encourage the reflexivity and individuality they see in their shoppers by the environment they create in their shop, ultimately assigning new meaning to the fashions in their shop. This study argues that secondhand fashion is a resistant practice of consumption in liquid modern times, but also teases out the ways in which secondhand shopping is embedded in liquid modernity.

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## **Chapter One: Theory and Method**

### **Experiencing Secondhand**

*I entered the Buffalo Exchange, welcomed by a line of sellers carrying overflowing bags of clothing. I only had two small bags with neatly folded garments, marking myself as a neophyte among the pros who carried several large, messily packed duffel bags. I waited the better part of an hour, watching intently as the young buyer sifted through other sellers' wardrobes. The buyer scored loads of new things for her store from some sellers' bursting bags, while taking only a few from others. She worked quickly, spending less than 15 seconds examining each garment. I was surprised that her eye was so good--what was she looking for? She certainly was not scrutinizing the condition of the clothing, rather only glancing at the label and more briefly at the garment itself. After pacing the store several times I decided that I would rid myself of most of my old clothes, considering the things I saw on the rack. The brands and styles there seemed to align with the items from my closet. Despite the confidence I had gained from my time in the store, I could not help staring with rapt attention as the young woman began vigorously tearing through my two small bags of clothing. She began making piles on the counter of which I immediately analyzed to determine which she would be buying from me and which she would reject. As she sorted and judged my anxiousness was amplified and then it happened—she stuffed all of my clothing back into one bag and called my name. I knew that she had, without remorse, stamped each*

*garment I had offered with rejection. She proceeded to give me her spiel that I could tell she had many opportunities to practice...” You have all the right brands. Mall brands sell very well here, but your labels are not recent enough for our customers to be interested in.” OUCH! There I was; the pieces that I had worn at least several times in the last 2-3 years....products that displayed my identity were, in some way or another, rejects. In a way I also felt rejected. I could hear voices in my head saying, “Your taste, your style, your choices were not good enough...they were not timeless...they did not endure.” “It is bad enough you wore these fashions as long as you did. It would be a good idea to NEVER wear them again.” Defeated and rejected, I left the Buffalo Exchange, but with new curiosity for what this meant for individuals living in today’s society of consumption. I proceeded to donate my clothes to Goodwill; it was a relief to get them out of my closet.*

This was my first encounter with a secondhand shop in Denver, Colorado, which is much different than my past experiences in the secondhand shops of Wooster, a small town in Ohio. Based on years of taking old clothing to secondhand shops, I expected that the Buffalo Exchange would take all the garments I offered with out much thought and then send me a check a few months later for the items that sold. I never expected to feel so insecure about trying to clean out my closet. My sentiments were not unusual, as a young woman, who regularly sells her old clothes to secondhand shops, reported a similar sentiment, admitting, “I associate my clothes with my personality. If they don't buy my clothes, they don't like my clothes—and they don't like me” (Holmes, 2009, p. D2). It is this relationship between fashion and identity that I consider in this critical



project, as I explore how meaning is assigned to fashion through secondhand consumption/production practices.

### **Rationale**

The realm of secondhand fashion can be used to explore consumption, offering a specific context where it is possible to understand the meaning/s of fashions as they move through the fashion cycle, different shops, and bodies. Because the meanings of fashion are heavily dependent on their contexts, secondhand fashions are unique for two reasons: they have (potentially) appeared in an array of contexts and they have also been sold through a number of contexts. This makes secondhand fashions material with a history, meaning that they have narratives from previous owners and retail settings attached to or associated with them (Silverman, 1994), making their meanings more complex. The history and movement of these fashions through societal cycles and systems exhibit the fragmentary, constant change that characterizes postmodernity. As a result, these fashions offer the opportunity to look at postmodernity as it shapes consumption and more importantly how consumption affects individuals and their relationships. Secondhand fashions offer an opportunity to look at the ebb and flow of fashion trends and examine how individuals orient themselves to fashion, particularly out-dated fashions.

Through the lens of communication studies, fashion becomes a system of meaning that has power over and among people because of the rhetorical context that it is situated within and defined by. Fashion is not a language of its own (Stafford & Carter, 2006); it depends on the people and places that surround and use it to develop its meanings. Communication studies, and rhetorical studies in particular, offer the tools

needed to consider the messages that flow from and through fashion by parsing out its contextual meanings/implications.

Change and movement drive the fashion industry and secondhand fashion incorporates elements of change but in a unique way. In secondhand fashion the meaning and purpose of change diverges from the traditional fashion system. Secondhand fashion seems to be advocating change for personal style's sake rather than to keep up with the changing styles dictated by the fashion cycle. In spite of this, secondhand fashion does not put secondhand shoppers at a disadvantage when compared with traditional shoppers. Instead, it encourages shoppers to create a personal style that is creative, unique, and separate from the traditional fashion system (Wilson, 2003). Moreover these shops recontextualize fashion and fashion brands, shaping their meanings, values, and accessibility, potentially redistributing (or eroding) perceived brand power. Fashion (old or new) is a relevant and fruitful place to observe the constructs of class, identity, and agency because it is an industry and practice that is constantly changing and encouraging people to consume to re/invent their identity.

### **Research Orientation**

The purpose of this project is to explore more deeply the meanings and uses of secondhand fashion (and even home goods) as they align with or deviate from Bauman's (2000, 2007) concept of liquid modernity. Liquid modernity's premise that human lives are governed by opportunities for making choices, which are carried out in consumption, is the impetus for this project. The intention is to understand how consumption, identity, and meaning operate when defined/communicated through pre-owned fashion. By choosing the context of secondhand fashion as a means of observing liquid modernity, I

am able to observe how the seemingly infinite choices that Bauman (2000) claims characterize a society of consumers are narrowed to a specific industry. The context of secondhand isolates and makes manageable liquid modernity so that it is possible to hone in on identity and meaning, as they exist in flux.

In this chapter, I map out Bauman's (2000) conception of liquid modernity, using it to define what (secondhand) fashion is and how it operates. I then outline my research questions, which drive my interviews and orient my observations. Next, I detail the methods for data collection, including observations, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic interviews. An explanation of my role as participant observer follows, which is central to the ethnographic interviews conducted with shoppers, owners, and associates. I conclude with an overview of narrative analysis, which is used to interpret and organize the data I have collected. This chapter lays the theoretical and methodological foundations that focus and define this research project with particular attention to Bauman's (2000) liquid modernity.

### **A Theoretical Perspective on Fashion**

Bauman's (2000) theory of liquid modernity encourages one to be attentive to the way communication is embedded in the systems of production and consumption that are inescapable yet often unrealized. From a communicative perspective Bauman is essentially suggesting that humans are consuming the language and rhetoric that are attached to goods in a society of consumers. The rhetoric of advertisements, socioeconomic classes, businesses, and media make goods meaningful and desirable. They incite the desire to consume and fuel the race to live a life of constant consumption. Bauman's society of consumers could not be constructed without the presence of

rhetoric, leading individuals to view their lives in the context of consumption and objects as useful in creating one's self. Without the rhetoric that is attached to goods they have little meaning or use in constructing identity; rhetoric gives value to objects, making them desirable. Using Bauman's theory as a foundation for my research, I first discuss his definition of liquid modernity and then its implications for identity and relationships, identity and consumption, and finally, reflexivity.

### **Bauman's "liquid modernity."**

Bauman (2000) offers a unique perspective of society in the era that most characterize as post-modern. He calls his approach to a world in flux "liquid modernity" in order to better capture the constant transformation of society and the seemingly infinite choices it generates and regenerates. Liquid modernity describes the centrality of change that shapes our lives and how we experience the world. In liquid modernity nothing is certain or longstanding, except that there will continue to be change. The type of change that defines a liquid modern world is not one where old things disappear to make room for new things, rather the old morphs into the new. With this perspective, Bauman departs from Marx's argument that all solids melt into air, which suggests that solids come and go. Instead, Bauman claims that solids, the things we know, are in fact fluid and continually in flux as the old is perpetually transformed/reconstituted into new, ephemeral forms. In essence, the products, practices, and norms that unite individuals are being melted together and reformulated (Bauman, 2007).

In this context, choices become an important way of situating oneself within the constant flux of liquid modernity. Bauman (2007) frames the array of available choices as opportunities for consumption. What one chooses to consume (including goods,

products, ideas, relationships, etc.) gives individuals a sense of freedom in determining how they are situated in society and also who they are. Bauman (2007) contends that,

Consumers' 'subjectivity' is made out of shopping choices—made by the subject and the subject's prospective purchasers; its description takes the form of the shopping list. What is assumed to be the *materialization* of the inner truth of the self is in fact an idealization of the material—objectified—traces of consumer choices. (p. 15)

As such, individuals are led to believe that they are free to create and express their identities through the medium of consumed goods. They are called to be skilled consumers, constantly consuming and choosing to keep up with the flux of liquid modernity, which provides them with a never ending and always-predetermined shopping list.

From this characterization of society two central tenets of Bauman's (2000) theory emerge; the first being the enduring quest for perfection. As new choices develop and standards are altered there is no longer an attainable *telos*. Personal goals can be set but will not be achieved because they will become irrelevant in the context of a changing world. The second hallmark is that the drive to make new has become privatized and deregulated, meaning that the impetus and execution of modernizing is the responsibility of the individual rather than humanity collectively. Individuals are now responsible for making judgments about how and what to consume as a means of shaping their identity. The only caveat is that one must make a choice. The necessity of making a choice expands to all facets of life, including identity, relationships and the ability to practice

reflexivity. These portions of life are choice-driven and illuminate the pervasiveness of consumption and its role in human lives.

### **Identity and consumption.**

The choices one makes are used to situate (or as much as one can without reaching stability or fixity) oneself within the fluidity of liquid modernity. Consuming takes effort and attention to the changes in society in order to be recognized as a member of society. Bauman (2007) contends that consumption not only makes people members of society, but also transforms them into humans. This means that individuals are not born to be humans who are ready to enter society, nor do they simply develop naturally into socially accepted humans. Rather, humans entering a society of consumers must put work and effort into transforming themselves into “true humans” that can function in society. They have to learn how to negotiate the constant change of liquid modernity and make choices that will put them at an advantage over other consumers.

The high volume of choices also encourages liquid modern consumers to use goods as a means of individualization, which shifts the focus to the self and weakens bonds and interactions with other human beings. Individuals become concerned with how they appear to others, getting caught up in constant consumption. This leaves little time and energy to put into relationships; people are put secondary to the desire to consume and construct identity. Because change and choice are constant in liquid modernity, there are ample opportunities to attend to individualization by reconstructing the self with the choices available through consumption. Bauman’s conception of individuality is reliant on humans’ addiction to choice and the freedom that individuals presume they have based on their ability to make decisions that define who they are.

What most people overlook is that they are required to make a choice from what is made available to them. Looked at this way, choices are not an indication of freedom. Despite this, humans reap instant gratification from the things they consume, but it is no more than a fleeting satisfaction that leads them to desire something new, perpetuating the addiction to consumption. This can be a frustrating prospect for individuals, but it is important to note that this is the only respectable, acceptable way to alter and maintain self-identity in liquid modernity. This encourages a never-ending internal struggle to perfect the self in appearance and identity--a journey that will never be finished or even productive (Bauman, 2007).

One implication of this self-determinism through consumerism, which is particularly important in fashion, is the liquidity of class systems. Individuals can no longer aspire to a niche (of class, identity, security, or skill, etc.) in society, because standards are constantly changing. Class distinctions in society are also melting together, leaving no concrete place for individuals to move toward; their goals of securing a place in society are no longer relevant (Bauman, 2001b). Bauman characterizes this melting together as a “swarm,” meaning that “there is no exchange, no cooperation, no complementariness—just physical proximity and roughly coordinated direction of the current movement” (Bauman, 2007, p. 77) among members society as they come together and go their separate ways. People are not able to rely on or connect with one another; it becomes everyone for him or her self, united only as far as they feel secure in their numbers. With this fluid social structure comes more insecurity, as individuals struggle to feel as if they have a secure place in society. This encourages individuals to become jacks-of-all-trades, with a particular attention to sharpening the skill of consumption.

This skill is one that is essential to survival, as individuals fail to cooperate and are left to fend for themselves. Staying ahead of the changes and other individuals, who are caught up in the same struggle, is one of the only ways to achieve a sense of security. This creates competition and turns consumption into a race against other consumers. The struggle to stay ahead is consuming and ongoing; it takes effort and attention and cultivates insecurity (Bauman, 2007).

In liquid modernity, individuals become commodities in their own efforts to consume. Although individuals may not be aware, they are motivated to (and taught how to) consume by the desire to transform the self into a “sellable commodity.” This means that individuals become concerned with marketing the self to others and society in an attempt to appear as valuable as commodities. Thus individuals become bona fide members of a society of consumers. Becoming a sellable commodity is an individual project that is never complete as individuals are challenged to maintain their sellable status in a context that is constantly changing. As consumers, individuals feel shame when their bodies and lives are natural or unadorned, igniting the desire to consume on a variety of registers, including relationships.

### **Relationships.**

Bauman (2007) describes all of life as an extension of the tendency to consume; living is reduced to the activity of shopping for relationships, jobs, skills, goods, etc. In this case, everything (people, too) will inevitably go out of fashion or become obsolete, losing the ability to provide gratification. In turn, our lives and relationships become episodic, multiplying the human sentiment of insecurity (Bauman, 2001b). Competition to gain security and keep up with the constant change of liquid modernity separates



individuals from one another, discouraging attempts at unity or cooperation (Bauman, 2000a). Bauman (2001b) depicts relationships situated in a society where the individual comes first and the goal is instant satisfaction through consumption:

If the human bond is, like all other consumer objects, not something to be worked out through protracted effort and occasional sacrifice, but something which one expects to bring satisfaction right away, something that one rejects if it does not do that and keeps and uses only as long as (and no longer than) it continues to gratify- then there is not much point in trying hard and harder still, let alone in suffering discomfort and unease in order to save the partnership. (p. 157)

In a liquid modern world, relationships are devalued as a result of the choices of consumption. The expectations of instant gratification that individuals assume products will bring are also expected of people in relationships.

### **Reflexivity and choice.**

The choices of goods, services, activities, and even people are seemingly infinite, but they are also limited and limiting in the sense that they are pre-determined for an audience of consumers by capitalism, marketing schemes, and corporations. Bauman's (2007) theory leaves individuals with little hope of escaping the choices provided in a society of consumption, as he claims that in the midst of overwhelming choices and desires, individuals often behave “‘unreflexively’ –or in other words *without* thinking about what they consider to be their life purpose and what they believe to be the right means of reaching it...” (p. 52). Being unreflexive is an indication of a society of consumers where the mission to consume is easily adopted and accepted; in fact, the desire to consume is attributed to human nature. In this environment, it is difficult to

observe or comprehend the amount and nature of the choices available, making them seem infinite and freeing. Fashion is one context where these choices are manifested and important in constructing the self; in turn the fashion industry represents norms for consumers living in a liquid modern world. Secondhand fashion potentially provides insight into other ways identity is managed in liquid modernity, particularly in unexpected or tactical ways (De Certeau, 1984).

### **Defining Fashion**

To understand how fashion fits into a liquid modern world, a definition is necessary. Beginning broadly with the definition of clothing, I work toward a definition of fashion and ultimately secondhand fashion. Clothing is a broad term that describes all things used to cover the body but does not recognize the succession of styles over time. Fashion is a distinct form of clothing in that it recognizes the movement of clothing in and out of popularity (Davis, 1992). It is often used with the purpose of clothing the body to signify identification with a group or style that is time-sensitive. The time-sensitive nature of fashion is dependent on large and small changes in what Davis (1992) terms the clothing code, or how individuals, mainly in the middle class, read and respond to fashion. Sometimes these changes in the code are small, like shifting hemlines, and other times they are rather large and obvious, for example changes in style, shapes/silhouettes. Ideally, fashions “startle, captivate, offend, or otherwise engage sensibilities,” rather than the minor code changes that could be considered a clothing code (Davis, 1992, p. 15). From this perspective, fashion is defined by its ability to capture people’s attention and its power to affect people and society in a way that has meaning, relevance, and communicates a message. This is not to say that code changes

in clothing do not do the same thing, but they do it on a less obvious scale that does not leave as large a gap between old and new styles. As a result, its message is less potent and urgent.

This phenomenon can be mapped on a spectrum that accounts for price, quality, desirability, and attainability. High-end fashion and haute couture garments have high prices, impeccable quality, and are generally highly desired but difficult to obtain due to their high prices (Wojak & Hudz, 2007). High fashion serves as an opportunity to demonstrate wealth, style, and taste and is meant to be a distinct, clear signifier of socioeconomic class. On the opposite end of the spectrum, prêt-a-porter fashions are generally mass-produced and readily available for a reasonable price. Their accessible nature allows them to fulfill the necessity of clothing the body, but they are also marked by constant turnover that mimics the new releases of haute couture collections.

Individuals use prêt-a-porter fashions to imitate high fashion styles on more practical and functional scales and with less sharp socioeconomic implications (Davis, 1992). For the purposes of this study, fashion will indicate the items (produced and made popular by the ever-changing nature of the fashion system) that are used to adorn the body and have the ability to unite individuals who share similar power, social status, and worldviews, while effectively separating them from those who are different. I also associate fashion with consumption and choice, situating it as a tool individuals use to shape their reality.

### **Fashion and meaning.**

When considering fashion's meaning and uses, we need to consider the many meanings, narratives, and implications that fashion accumulates over time. For instance, fashion captures and perpetuates hierarchies and power deficits in society (Davis, 1992).

However, it is important to note that fashion does not necessarily create hierarchies and power differentials. Rather, it is a means of signifying these systems and demonstrating how they operate (Davis, 1992). Fashion also has the ability to map longstanding traditions and values, while perpetuating the fleeting themes that arise in society (Craik, 1994). For example, the corset has existed for centuries, but its styles and fabrics have developed, often reflecting societal themes, events, and discoveries. Specifically, following WWII the corset was altered to reflect NASA's quest to invent the space suit. The corset's fabrics were changed to mimic the revolutionary materials and shapes used to prepare the body for space travel (Hersch, 2009). The ability to mark cultural, social, and economic circumstances in society is the result of the fashion cycle. This cycle can be described by a number of complex theories, but most importantly it operates in a wave-like fashion and always has a beginning, middle, and end. It is the end of the cycle that I focus on for this project, or the "waning" stage, which occurs after society has been saturated with a fashion and that fashion is slowly made obsolete by the release of even newer fashions (Davis, 1992). Fashion never stops, and even after it becomes obsolete its meaning continues to develop. It marks the past, predicts what is to come, while also shaping reality and history.

### **Secondhand fashion.**

Secondhand fashion is a unique opportunity for consumption that is distinct in meaning, operations, and ideology. Under the umbrella of secondhand fashion there are several specifications that situate fashions more specifically, including, retro, vintage, antique, thrift, consignment, and resale—all of which refer to pre-owned goods.

Secondhand fashion is not totally subsumed by the traditional fashion system of newness

and change as it values what the traditional fashion system would consider expired fashion. Wilson (2001) presses back against the notion that the old should be considered waste as she says, “It is not clear how we should define the 'useless' or why useless objects should necessarily be ugly. It does not necessarily follow that change must be wasteful,” declares Wilson (2001, p. 57). Her statement illuminates the unpredictable and sometimes irrational movement of garments in and out of style, leaving room for the possibility of recycling fashions rather than declaring them waste.

Despite the fact that waste from the fashion system can be reused, recycled, and resold, old fashion does not reenter the same system of fashion that produced it (Silverman, 1994). Specifically, Silverman describes “(thrift shop dressing) as a sartorial strategy that works to denaturalize its wearer’s specular identity, and one that is fundamentally irreconcilable with fashion” (p.194). What this means is that thrift shops, a type of secondhand shop, make its wearers’ appearance unfamiliar and unique so as not to be representative of the current styles in fashion. Although I considered thrift shopping to be low-end secondhand shopping, the shoppers who participated in this study made little or no distinction, as they called shopping at high-end secondhand shops “thrift shopping” (among other things). Part of using any type of secondhand fashion to clothe the self is having the option to stand out. In doing so, wearers of secondhand fashion construct a stylized image/identity that may or may not incorporate current fashions. Secondhand fashion is irreconcilable with fashion in that it develops new meaning as it changes hands and becomes older. It is also sold under conditions that are much different than retail, and it cannot possibly mimic what is “now” in fashion. Thus secondhand

fashion does not reenter the fashion cycle; it cannot escape its status as obsolete fashion—the last phase in the fashion cycle.

Although Wilson (2001) believes that there is value in outdated fashions, she (along with others) agrees that a fashion's meaning, influence, and relevance diminish over time (e.g., Palmer, 2005). Despite the change in meaning and relevance, secondhand fashion does rely on recognition of brand and/or style like the traditional fashion system (Palmer, 2005). In the same way, alternative styles and fashions also develop new meanings over time and are eventually absorbed by mainstream fashions as they are recognized as in fashion (Wilson, 2001). All fashions reach their prime in the mainstream, although they rarely begin or end in the mainstream. In sum, secondhand fashion must be somewhat recognizable, but it is understood that its original meaning will have deteriorated. Thus, the consumer faces the task of making the secondhand garment meaningful and relevant in their personal style.

Secondhand shopping is a skill that is learned and perfected, much different than the generic experience of shopping in malls or department stores. It offers more choices at one time as there are few, if any, duplicate garments in the shop. Secondhand shops are a conglomeration of brands, styles, colors, sizes, and qualities, making it impossible to find a particular garment in multiple sizes and colors. In secondhand shops garments appear to be one of a kind. These shops challenge shoppers to know what a good deal looks like, where to find it, and how to wear it. Taste and personal style are what make secondhand fashion stylish and meaningful, thus meaning is made by buyers and shop owners rather than producers of fashion. Secondhand fashion is a broad term that recognizes an array of operations including consignment, resale, trading, as well as types

of shopping including thrift, vintage, new or nearly new, retro and high/low-end fashion. In any case, most secondhand fashion shops and websites offer a unique shopping experience which plays with the tension between highly organized operations and seemingly disorganized practices, which together give consumers the pleasure of searching for “treasures” (Palmer, 2005). This characteristic situates secondhand shopping as an art and secondhand shoppers as connoisseurs of clothing (Palmer, 2005).

Secondhand fashion complicates fashion and how it operates, as well as how individuals use it to form their identity. For one, the meanings of garments become more complex as they enter the secondhand market. They are complicated by the stories that are attached to the clothing as a result of their previous ownership. Silverman (1994) explains this complexity, “Thrift-shop dressing recycles fashion’s waste, exploiting the use values that remain in discarded but often scarcely worn clothing. Because it establishes a dialogue between the present-day wearers of that clothing and its original wearer’s...” (p.195). Wilson (2001) concurs with Silverman’s (1994) understanding of the dialogue that secondhand garments work to establish adding that secondhand fashions are embedded in cultural and historical moments that are also attached to them and influence their meaning.

### **Fashion as communication.**

Fashion communicates for individuals, as well as among them. Distinct messages are communicated within groups of individuals who wear similar fashions, as well as to those who are apart of different groups. In this sense, fashion is a form of communication that affects people and their relationships as much as verbal communication (Engel, 2004), as individuals use fashion to align themselves with

particular groups, movements, and/or identities according to the fashions they do or do not wear. By affiliating the self with brands, trends, and styles, one communicates social status, power, interests, etc. Individuals choose within their economic confines, what their body will/will not do or say as well as who they can/cannot be via the medium of fashion.

Fashion communicates by employing a system of complex symbols and codes that have rich, polysemous meanings (Hollander, 1978). In this way, fashion is "invested with symbolic meaning" (Engel, 2004, p. 2) as it works to socially construct individuals' realities and self-perceptions. However, fashion does not qualify as a language, counter to Barthes' argument in his book, *The Fashion System* (Stafford & Carter, 2006). The metaphor of fashion as a language is deceptive, because one will never be able to discern a system of rules that guide clothing choices or interpretations (Davis, 1992). A language of fashion could never be mapped due to the gross ambiguity of fashion's meanings and individuals' choices and interpretations (Davis, 1992). Not being able to classify fashion as a language is a testament to its complexity and ever-fluid nature. Fashion's meaning changes from viewer to viewer and wearer to wearer, illuminating its ability to transform and be transformed on an unpredictable basis. This gives people the freedom to use and interpret fashion as they wish. Thus what constitutes fashion is never exactly clear, giving goods and garments the freedom to slip "in and out of fashion" without reason.

Shopping, fashion, and consumption are complicated further "within the everyday act of dressing, clothes, mass marketing, and performativity intersect to communicate a subjective identity" (Engels, 2004, p. 2). The multitude of subjective identities further complicates the meaning of fashion but also confirms its ability to communicate in distinct, fluid, and useful ways.



### **Fashion in a liquid modern world.**

Fashion can be understood as a postmodern text that responds to and mirrors the liquid modern conditions described by Bauman (2007). It, however, has not always been a postmodern text. Fashion develops and adapts according to the context and time in which it is located. In modern times, clothing and its meaning was limited, adhering to hierarchical structure and more concrete meanings (Svendsen, 2006). For example, during the feudal period, social classes were entirely separate, and their clothing indicated severe differences in status (e.g. lords and serfs). These distinct social classes wore specific types of clothing, which communicated a specific message of power and status (Svendsen, 2006). However, the liquid modern conditions of today make it possible for multiple meanings to flow through clothing according to the societal conditions that surround it. According to Svendsen (2006):

In more fragmentary postmodern societies, on the other hand, clothes function more as 'open' texts that can constantly acquire new meaning. This is not the least due to different groups wanting to use the same items of clothing but to ascribe considerably different meaning...The time aspect also plays a role.

(p. 71)

Between these bodies, places, and interpretations fashion's meaning is rarely enduring. It is the consideration of context that offers insight into the material message that fashion sets forth.

Because fashion is dependent on context, liquid modernity has a large influence on what fashion is and how it operates. Liquid modernity causes fashion to adapt to the constant search for goods to consume by offering an endless supply of new goods.

Fashion perpetuates the search for goods that construct identity as it commits to newness and change, causing what is “in style” to be fleeting (Veblen, 1953). Svendsen (2006) captures the cycle of newness and the desire to consume for identity’s sake, arguing that,

Fashion is allegedly the missing essence of the postmodern self, which is programmed constantly to go off in search of new versions of itself, but it becomes a self without any constancy whatsoever --a self that disappears without ever having been itself. (p.148)

This understanding of fashion argues that our identities are contained within and formatted by the systems of consumption we live in (Dickinson, 1997). At the same time fashion and its consumption are embedded in liquid modern times that shift fashion’s (and consumption’s) purpose, as well as the reasons for which individuals desire it. Fashion, in this system, cannot be escaped, declares Barthes (Stafford & Carter, 2006), “Clothing concerns all of the human person, all the body, all the relationships of Man to body as well as the relationships of the body to society... clothing was an element which involved, as it were, the whole of being” (p. 96). Covering the body is an inescapable part of our culture. Fashion, as a type of clothing, also has the ability to consume human attention, bodies, and relationships. It is a tool for shaping identity in liquid modernity.

The drive to perfect the self and the decline of human relationships/interactions make fashion an appealing means of identity transformation because communication through fashion is not dependent on direct interaction. Fashion is also relatively accessible and effective as a means of constructing identity, given that the funds are available to purchase it. This leads individuals to rely on fashion as a means for

communicating socioeconomic status among other group associations and ultimately identity. As human interaction becomes less valued, but personal identity remains important in a liquid modern world (Bauman, 2007), individuals will gravitate to a more visible means of transforming themselves, elevating the importance of visual communication. Fashion does just that, as it is a visual indicator of status, values, and one's ability to discriminate.

### **Research Questions**

To guide my interest in how secondhand fashion is assigned meaning through consumption, the following series of question, including one central question (RQ1) and two sub-questions, will help organize my thoughts and observations.

RQ1: How does the consumption of secondhand fashion align with or counter (or both) systems of consumption that rely on constant turnover that transforms goods into “waste”?

The following sub-questions questions are meant to break down the larger, cultural question posed above in order to address the everyday situations of running a shop and the shopping that occurs in the context of secondhand shops. The consumer-focused portion of the broader research question is:

RQ1a: What does secondhand fashion mean to consumers and how is it used to define the self?

More specifically, I am interested in exactly how meaning is assigned to fashion during the act of consumption and how that meaning translates into identity. This process is inevitably complicated in secondhand operations as meaning is more complex.

The shop owners' role in answering RQ1 is to offer a different perspective of how

meaning is assigned to pre-owned clothing. My goal is to pay special attention to the context that the shops' owners have created and how this shapes the meaning of secondhand fashions, illuminating the ways that their approaches to retail operations differ or align with the sale of new garments. The portion of this question that can be answered by working with shop owners is:

RQ1b: How do shop owners manufacture and assign meaning to their secondhand fashion shops and the clothing they sell?

In short, this project will examine secondhand fashion, paying particular attention to how meaning is reconstituted according to context and what this means for identity construction and human relationships as they are maintained via consumption in a postmodern world.

## **Methodology**

To answer these research questions, I interview shop owners, observe the culture, and interview/shopp with consumers. My discussion of methodology begins with the collection of data. I then address my role as a “participant as observer” (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002), followed by a discussion of the importance of practicing reflexivity as a way to account for my progression from a novice to an insider, deepening my understanding of secondhand culture. Finally, I offer narrative analysis as a means for organizing and making sense of the data. Together these practices and methods illuminate patterns and progression in the experiences others and myself have in secondhand culture.

### **Collecting data.**

My goal is to collect data that represents the views, actions, motives, and reasoning of consumers of secondhand goods, as well as how shop owners contribute to the meaning of secondhand fashion. Both perspectives are important in this study because of the pervasiveness of consumption in a liquid modern world. The shoppers provide insight into why they buy secondhand goods and what they make of them, while the shop owners' perspectives speak to their role in creating meaning for the clothing they sell. Shop owners illuminate the shoppers' accounts, as they have the opportunity to watch individuals consume on a daily basis and share meaningful, but rare instances of consumption or offer a broader perspective of what consumer habits look like in their shops.

The three shops I work with in this study include Nice As New, Twice As Nice, and Simply Seconds<sup>1</sup>. I conduct the majority of my observations at these three shops and work with these shops' owners for owner interviews. To guide these interviews I use a semi-structured interview format. This means that my goal is to be conversational during the interview, developing and incorporating new questions as appropriate. This allows for a more flexible interview schedule that can accommodate the interviewee's responses and new directions (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). The semi-structured interviews with owners seek to understand their role in secondhand culture (see Appendix A for interview schedule). I also conduct one follow-up interview with Ella, one of the shop owners initially interviewed, in order to clarify past narratives and collect additional narratives. I

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<sup>1</sup> Shop names have been changed to pseudonyms.

collect data from shoppers by interviewing (also semi-structured, see Appendix B) them and then shopping with two consumers, Mary Ann and Amy<sup>2</sup>, on two separate occasions. These two women were both included in the initial semi-structured interviews of the four shoppers. While I shopped with these women, I conducted ethnographic interviews. (see Appendix C for interview themes).

I have selected these three stores because I feel they are representative of the array of secondhand shops in Denver. For example, Nice As New operates as a boutique, with a tidy appearance and a lot of its own flair (animal print rugs, comfy chairs, wood floors), while Twice as Nice is messy and over flowing with goods that range from high-end to low-end fashions and brand new to worn out. Simply Seconds differs further, as it has the most high-end stock, but presents it in an understated way, displaying very organized racks and clear signs, but without a lot of color or decor to personalize the store. With these representative stores as my site of research, I am able to offer a more comprehensive, in-depth look at what it means to be a secondhand shop.

### **Ethnographic interviews with shop owners and associates.**

I follow up with shop owners and the shop employees through ethnographic interviews. This type of interview was chosen based on my initial interactions with shop owners and the realization that they were willing to share valuable information without prompt or question. Ethnographic interviewing is a spontaneous practice that requires the researcher to be attentive to the situations they find themselves in and quick to organize their thoughts, responses, and questions in a way that keeps meaningful conversation moving along (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). In this way, I am able to make the most of slow

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<sup>2</sup> All shoppers and shop owners names have also been changed to pseudonyms.

moments in the shop to collect their stories and information. I continued observing until my observations reached saturation, but my hope is to maintain the relationships with these owners beyond this project.

**“Participant as observer” approach.**

To observe secondhand culture, I situate myself as a “participant as observer,” which means that I make my research intentions known and relate, identify, and interact with the study’s participants naturally and freely (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I learn how to be an active member of their lives and shop operations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), to better understand how the rhetoric of fashion is used in the construction of identity. As such, I shop with shoppers but do not assume the role of a practiced secondhand shopper. I let my inexperience guide the observations and experiences I have while in the field. In this role, I also interact with shop owners as if I am a part of their staff. My role is, however, not one of commitment or for pay as there are regular employees. As a participant as observer, I focused on the specifics of people, interactions, settings, and events without the intention of passing judgment. I attend to and represent the details and narratives of secondhand shoppers and owners as they are told/heard. To illuminate meaning and importance I strive to strike a balance between theory and participants’ voices, using Pollock’s (1999) work with interviews about birth stories and Jackson’s (2003) experience in Harlem as examples. By supplementing observations with personal thought and experience I hope to achieve verisimilitude, recognizing that I am a part of this lifestyle of consumerism and destined to choose from the same choices as others. I treat my personal experiences as an opportunity to relate to participants and as objects of analysis in themselves.

### **Shopping with consumers.**

To get a consumer perspective, I located four individuals who shop secondhand shops regularly. I interviewed each of them using a semi-structured format (see Appendix B for script). I selected two to accompany on a shopping trip. I joined their shopping routine to understand how they use secondhand shops and the fashion they purchase in them, as well as their strategies for shopping secondhand. In these shopping situations I also employ the ethnographic interview style, as I situate myself as a participant observer.

### **Reflexivity.**

My goal is to record what I experience with as little interpretation and judgment as possible, being sure to take time after each period of observation to practice reflexivity by writing about my feelings, thoughts, reactions, and interpretations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This is particularly important as I begin as a novice in the context of secondhand fashion and slowly learn how to participate in this culture (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Since my experience at the Buffalo Exchange, mentioned at the beginning, I have not tried to sell my clothing through any other secondhand shops. My experience at the Buffalo Exchange left me feeling inadequate and out of the loop. As a seller, I have not discovered any concrete rules or systems with which owners discriminate garments. As buyer, I am also inexperienced. I do not know what to look for in secondhand garments and often feel overwhelmed at the prospect of sifting through the mass of clothing secondhand shops contain. Reflexivity helped me account for the process of learning the secondhand culture, allowing me to notice the intricacies of secondhand culture as I learned to be an insider.



### **Narrative analysis.**

To make sense of the mass of data collected during interviews and observations I employ narrative analysis. For the organization and analysis of this data I adhere to the structure of narrative analysis that is “loosely formatted, almost intuitive” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 465). Within this framework, I define narratives as accounts of personal experiences that are organized as far as they have a beginning, middle, and an end. The interview format used in this study was meant to spark narratives, making each question an opportunity for the interviewee to narrativize their life experiences and events (Riessman, 1993). For the purposes of this project, I select narratives from my interviews (owners and shoppers) that: a) were relevant to my research questions and b) developed details and themes that others interviewees expressed in their narratives, including similar feelings, thoughts, opinions, goals, and interpretations. I then craft these narratives into a larger narrative that is representative of the secondhand culture.

In composing the narrative, I situate myself as the teller of the larger narrative but strive to work with my interviewees’ voices, feelings, and experiences making the compilation of a larger narrative an act of co-production (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In addition, I occasionally offer my personal experiences during observations, as I learn to be a secondhand shopper further contributing to the co-production of a larger narrative of secondhand culture. In the end, my goal is to compare and contrast the narratives that I construct from shoppers’ and owners’ personal experiences, which are considered to be internal narratives, with external narratives of consumption in society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In this case, external narratives of consumption are written and accepted by society and perpetuate a system of norms and standards. Ultimately, I hope that

evaluating shoppers' and owners' narratives in relation to society's narratives will empower consumers and shop owners of all kinds to reconsider how they use and view consumption by understanding how it operates in their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

Bauman's (2007) liquid modernity serves as the impetus for this project. It organizes my observations and drives the interviews described above. As this chapter reveals, this theory describes fashion and its operations, while fashion also illustrates Bauman's theory in a way that narrows down the choices available in a society of consumption. This research endeavor seeks to explore the claims and implications of Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, attempting to discern the relationship between outdated fashion choices that exist in the midst of new fashion opportunities. What follows is meant to parse out the relationships between consuming goods and identity and explicate how people live or do not live Bauman's theory of liquid modernity through secondhand shopping. To do this I begin with owners' perspectives in Chapter 2, continuing with shopper's perspectives in Chapter 3 and finally putting the owner and shoppers perspectives in conversation in Chapter 4 to illuminate how secondhand shopping does and does not resonate with liquid modernity and societal norms.

## **Chapter Two: Beyond Consumption, a Narrative of Shop Owners**

In this chapter you will meet Ella, Amanda, and Jennifer, three experienced secondhand shop owners. These three owners talk through what the fashions mean in context of their shops, as they explore how the fashions they sell are used to create identity, foster relationships, and from a cohesive community of women. The narratives represented in this chapter explore the environment that shop owners try to create for their customers with special attention to the experience they want their shoppers to have and how they want them to view secondhand shopping. Together Ella, Jennifer, and Amanda offer a window into the secondhand industry in Denver, Colorado. All of the owners are women who serve mainly other women through their shops. Although their purposes and operations are similar, these women have very distinct personalities, but surprisingly similar backgrounds. I introduce them here at the beginning of this chapter with the hope that its readers will truly get to know Ella, Amanda, and Jennifer as I have. I begin with Ella, because I have spent the most time with her and her voice is a prominent part of this chapter.

### **Meet the Owners**

Ella was born and raised in Chicago. Her parents had a great appreciation for art and music that helped Ella to develop her personal taste and eye for style. Without any formal education in fashion, Ella became an apprentice to a gentleman who owned and operated a vintage shop. She learned how to run a business and refined her eye for style

and quality as she worked in his shop. She is a soft-spoken woman, who confessed that she hates being interviewed and generally feels uncomfortable talking about herself. Ella is humble, as she struggles with admitting that she has a talent for knowing style and running a business, but from the goods in her shop and the fashions with which she adorns her body it is obvious that she is creative and talented. She is working towards owning her success and taking credit for her accomplishments. She seemed to be thinking deeply about what she said during our interviews, as a result her pace is slow and her speaking a bit confusing as she will often change thoughts or directions after beginning her response. Ella showed great interest in this project and put sincere effort into helping me understand her business.

In contrast to Ella's humble persona, Amanda was almost obnoxious with pride and superiority. Amanda grew-up fostering her love for clothing by teaching herself how to sew. She enjoyed always looking different and using clothing as a way of expressing herself. She purchased her shop from her fiancé's mother just before she broke off their engagement. Her potential mother-in-law had a reputation for being rather mean to her customers. Amanda thought that if this woman could survive in this business, certainly she could make the shop more successful by simply being nice to people. She tells me that she is sincerely involved with her customers, but her interactions with others (especially me) seemed to suggest otherwise. She is loud and sometimes over powering. She does most of the talking most of the time and says what is on her mind. Her confidence is visible in her posture and her voice. She was willing to participate in this project, she says, because that is what she always does—helps others out. Despite her

overpowering personality, the more time I spent in Amanda's shop the more I realized that she did care about her shoppers, her personality was just a bit dramatic.

Finally, Jennifer was much more relaxed in her business operations and in talking about her shop. Secondhand fashion has been a large part of Jennifer's life since she was young. She and her two sisters always received hand-me-downs from their cousins. She can barely remember owning anything new during her childhood. To this day Jennifer still buys all of her clothing secondhand and mostly from her own shop, claiming that she does not see the point or value of going to a department store. Her drive to start a consignment shop was ignited by, what she calls, the REAL American Dream of owning her own business. She still enjoys her work and maintains the relationships that helped her get started in this business. Jennifer is a calm person. She is a very dedicated and hard worker, sometimes staying at her shop late in the evenings to keep things running smoothly. As a result, she always seems exhausted, but still at peace with her own exhaustion. She views her shop as a unique place and takes great pride in the way she treats people. Jennifer is thoughtful and relaxed in her speech. She was excited to help with this project because of her own love for philosophy and her belief that there was more happening in her shop than selling fashion.

What follows are the narratives of these three hard-working women, who are changing what fashion means, where you find it, and most importantly how you experience it. The way they run their shops and treat individuals make shopping an experience that is counter to what one would expect in the liquid modern world that Bauman (2007) claims they are situated in. Together they paint a picture of secondhand

fashion and business that calls attention to the importance and centrality of individual identities, relationships, and community, making the fashions in their shops meaningful according to their own standards.

### **Contextualizing the Secondhand Industry**

Secondhand shops are now in vogue, but it has not always been that way. These shops and the clothing in them had to overcome the stigma of being used or worn out. Ella offers her take on the vacillation of secondhand fashion's popularity.

**Ella:** I would say it's been maybe ten years that this (type of shopping) has become an in vogue way to shop. You know where people are saying instead of, "I spent 500 for this" they're bragging, "I found it at the thrift store for \$5" or—you know—got it secondhand for a cheaper amount. It is more acceptable, you know.

The owners of secondhand shops, who worked with me in this study, situate their secondhand shops as a smart, savvy, stylish alternative to retail operations. They exist to share their expertise in and love for fashion, which manifests itself differently in the organization, aesthetics, and inventory of each store. No two are alike, but they all try to be attentive to current fashions. Amanda explains the importance of keeping with the times in relation to her customers' expectations.

**Amanda:** All I know is that we do pay attention to what is current and what is the looks for the seasons so that people can feel like they're dressing the same way they would if they shopped retail. You can ask Anna that...right Anna? (a frequent shopper who happened to be in the shop).

As owners work to maintain this balance between used garments and new fashions, they create a unique environment for their shoppers, flirting with capitalistic norms and alternative approaches to consumption.

Even though secondhand shop owners are aware of the need to be current, they have different clothes, challenges, goals, and modes for operating. Jennifer reflects on secondhand fashion's uniqueness as she explains how secondhand shops represent quality and variety.

**Jennifer:** They're different (secondhand clothes). Well, I think, well they're probably not as trendy, you know, its kinda like if you're driving out in the street you see so many Toyotas, just kidding, that you don't notice them. They become invisible, but how often are you just kinda driving down the street and you see a Bentley or a Roles Royce go by. You kinda take note. I see a lot of that stuff. I see a lot of Bentleys and a lot of Roles Royces in here, but if I go to a mall or I go somewhere else like I just see, it doesn't matter you go to Park Meadows and you go from one store to the next there's only so many buyers. You know, people don't realize that, but you know, there's only so many buyers and they buy from all the same, few manufacturers and they end up with all the same stuff in store after store. They know its easier to shop because they can organize it better than I can...Like a rack like that (pointing to the circular rack right in front of the counter) we probably have 200 items on 'em, each one of 'em representing two hundred different stores and that's just one rack.

These owners are recontextualizing the high-end garments that once appeared in department stores and boutiques by placing them in new, and often less glamorous, settings and among a variety of brands and qualities. For example, a St. John's suit that had originally cost around \$1,000, now being resold for a few hundred, could be hanging on a rack with (or rack next to) the casual clothing from the Gap, which is being resold for around \$15. This recontextualization gives brands and fashions new meanings.

### **A Secondhand Ideology**

How meaning is assigned to fashion in secondhand shops also became clear in the narratives of secondhand shop owners. I noticed that shop owners' narratives offered a particular ideology that they attach to shopping and the fashions in their shops. In the following chapters I call this the "secondhand ideology." It is helpful to lay this ideology out in the beginning of this chapter to better understand the way these three shop owners' narratives are unified. There are three points that characterize the secondhand ideology that these women promote in their shops. First of all, shop owners operate from the belief that people are important, more important than stuff. Relationships are valued and fashion is viewed as a shared interest that can unite the women who shop secondhand. Secondly, these owners operate with a commitment to fostering genuine interaction. Each of these women is sincerely committed to treating their customers as individuals. Finally, shop owners believe that it is important to avoid discrimination, by creating a comfortable environment that welcomes individuals of all social statuses. Shoppers are taught about quality and encouraged to try on even the most expensive fashions in the shop, whether they can afford them or not.



These three hallmarks of the secondhand ideology are different than any other shopping situation, because (as you will see) secondhand shops and owners create an intimate setting where relationships and shopping can occur in harmony. The secondhand ideology does not exist in corporate settings according to owners who believe that retail settings perpetuate the race to consume and are more concerned with making a sale than a connection. The respect secondhand shop owners offer shoppers is not the norm and does not usually manifest itself public life, especially other stores. As I construct their narratives in this chapter, this ideology becomes clear and helpful in understanding shop owners intentions.

### **Transforming Meaning by Promoting a Different Kind of Shopping**

One of the components of recontextualization is the physical move secondhand garments make from company/brand controlled retail venues to secondhand shops. However, this physical shift also changes the protocol for how shopping plays out. Shopping norms are challenged, as secondhand shops provide an environment that encourages consumers to shop for a different reason. This is not to say that liquid modern norms for consumption do not leak into their shops, but owners try to combat this type of shopping by fostering an environment of self-acceptance, interaction, and possibilities for new and interesting choices to be made. Creating a unique shopping environment is one way that shop owners attempt to make fashions meaningful in a way that is distinct from the race to consume the newest fashions that society declares are stylish.

### **Liquid modernity and secondhand shopping.**

Clad in black capri pants, a tan cropped sweater, and boots that expressed what she called her “punk phase,” Ella appeared from the back room. She ushered me to the front of the shop. We sat down on the red couch. There were clothes all around us, including a display of hats and purses that filled the windowsill above the couch. Clearly at home, she removed her shoes so she could proper her feet up on the coffee table in front of us. She spoke in frustration, articulating how she feels when shoppers who are caught up in the race to consume particular brands use her shop.

**Ella:** I think the struggle is to watch perhaps, maybe the priorities of people... um...kinda change in terms of what--how they can--how they use these labels and these looks to define them. That’s been a personal struggle for me because first of all I’m--I respect these higher-end labels. I respect there um, ooh, I guess their designer, but at the same time...um we’re willing to consume knockoffs...and um...what I call the bastardization of labels and in order to present ourselves as being rich to others—strangers! So that is a little bit of a conflict for me... then I had found to be successful and to be recognized, its about the labels I carry... word of mouth in the younger community has gotten out that I—you can come down here and get a Chloe bag—a real one...So that’s been a bit of a conflict, a personal conflict for me.

Ella struggles with the desire to construct the self/identity from clothing. She recognizes, as Bauman (2007) does, that the individuals who use her shop seem to be obsessed with status signifiers as they try to make up for their insecurities and desperately seek a secure

niche in society through their appearance. Knowing that she sells real Chloe bags that attract status-hungry individuals, Ella realizes that she supports the race to get ahead of the “style pack.” However, like the other owners, Ella tries to abate this mentality by creating an environment that encourages women to shop differently. As you will see, she encourages women to understand fashion as something other than a status signifier. The environments where fashions are located, shopped for, and purchased in alter what the fashions mean.

**Promoting discretion.**

The greed and obsession with brands that Ella sees from some of her shoppers is not the norm for her own or other owners’ shops. Many practiced secondhand shoppers have the ability to chose what is and is not stylish according to their own bodies and tastes with little or no regard for what the fashion cycle is telling them that they need at this particular moment. Jennifer articulately expresses what it means for a shopper to use discretion in the consumption of fashion.

As we chat in Jennifer’s closed up shop, to which she has now locked the doors, Jennifer pulls out a cigarette and explains that sometimes she goes outside to smoke, but tonight its just too cold. She lights up her cigarette and begins to smoke, mentioning that the people who know that she smokes in the store tell her they can smell it; but she assures me its all in their heads. As her smoke drifts past me, she sets her freshly lit cigarette down on the counter and begins to tell me about how her shoppers are using her shop and how an environment of collaboration and self-acceptance it cultivated.

**Jennifer:** They (shoppers) feel comfortable meeting people here because they sort of already have that bond (of liking shopping/clothing). You know, I mean there's no stigma with people that are in their own right and I do believe that to be in your own right comes with a certain amount of passage. I just don't think its possible at 16 or 22 or 30 you can be. Its just sort of like you gotta earn it. There is a point where I think the majority of people—men and women—though we're speaking to women here, you reach a point where, you know what? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter what other people think about where you shop, or you know, what you eat or what you drink or what you do or who you marry or where you live and all of these things sort of become you know externals are not longer the definition of who you are.

Jennifer explains that the norm for shoppers and people in general is to care what others think and strive to adhere to societal standards. This drive to be accepted by others is indicative of the liquid modern world that she and her shoppers are situated in (Bauman, 2007). Jennifer affirms that clothing and identity are closely connected for the majority of one's life, but as some individuals grow older they are able to reflect on their lives, identities, and how they are situated in society. She calls this coming of age being in one's "own right," which seems to be a breaking away from what Bauman calls the *style pack*, which is composed of a group of "'significant others,' the 'others who count' and whose approval or rejection draws a line between success and failure" (p. 82). From this new, reflexive perspective shoppers can see the limitations of using fashion to define the self, questioning the prescribed uses and importance of consumption. This idea of

“coming into your right” relieves one of the constant race to consume that characterizes liquid modernity (Bauman, 2007). It is a place of peace and acceptance of one’s identity, which one can express in a way that makes sense and feels good personally.

However, even an individual “in their own right” cannot escape the burden of making choices in a consumer society. What Jennifer and her shoppers can do is exercise control over how they view the fashions in her shop and how they put them to work in their everyday lives (De Certeau, 1984). In this way, they are making choices, but they are also making their own standards for those choices, using their ability to choose in new ways, and assigning their choices meaning beyond the value society assigns to them. De Certeau (1984) suggests that these choices are an opportunity for resistance, as objects’ intended uses are manipulated to fit one’s own needs/desires, or in this case one’s “own right.” Looked at from this perspective, secondhand fashion can resist in its operations and uses through the meaning that is assigned to it. What Jennifer expresses is the process of withdrawing from the race of consumption and focusing on the self, honoring one’s body and choosing fashion that flatters it.

### **Breaking away from the style pack.**

Jennifer’s commitment to helping individuals “come into their own right” is directly related to the fashion she sells in her shop. Fashion becomes the tool through which she helps women break away from the style pack, reframing what fashion means according to what it looks like on each woman’s body rather than its brand or price. She trains women to see fashion aesthetically, including the way color, fit, and style compliment their bodies. There is little focus on defining fashions according to their

brand or what the fashion cycle says one should be wearing. More than the act of consumption and the income that it provides for Jennifer, she is concerned with women's self-presentation/perception and how they feel about their bodies. By interacting with consumers, she is able to help them perceive fashion differently.

**Jennifer:** You know, I guess it (interactions with shoppers) almost follows that it would (change the meaning of the clothing). I—if somebody is trying on three outfits and two of them are very expensive and the other one isn't, but the other one looks better in my opinion, which I think is pretty qualified, I know what looks good on other people. I don't necessarily care as much about myself that way. I'm more interested in them looking good than me. Um, I would sell 'em the cheaper outfit if it was—if it looked better on them.

Jennifer situates the possibility of making a sale secondary to the possibility of helping women look and feel their best. She is encouraging women to communicate their identity through how they wear clothes rather than through brands and prices. How one performs the things they consume, particularly what one wears, has the power to control relationships and manage identity, as it is perceived by the self and others (Waggoner & Hallstein, 2001). Clothing is a performance of identity with the power to foster equality or inequality in relationships. In addition, the clothing one consumes defines one's identity, giving one the power to perform different, surprising identities that can manipulate power. It is this power that Jennifer is trying to give to her shoppers, helping them to break away from the standards set forth by the fashion industry and liquid modernity. She is also reframing Bauman's (2007) notion of individualism, shifting the

criteria for being an individual from consumption of mass-produced goods to how individuals use and view those goods.

Ella reflects on a particular instance that exemplifies the commitment to women and their bodies and identities over money and consumption. Ella speaks sincerely as her eyebrows furrow in concern. The pace of her speaking slows, as she seems to be reliving the interaction in her head from the previous evening.

**Ella:** It's interesting, I have been thinking about this lady all day who was in here last night, who was very self aware of her... She was in a hurry—she needed an outfit and she was very self aware of her body and its... Lets call em "issues." But um and how things did not fit her, but it was so refreshing to have her not put herself down and I have been thinking about her all day. How I would love to have her come back and really work with her in getting her look together because she likes herself even though she's a little bit over weight. You know, to have people, you know...there's a little bit of therapy thing...listening to people put themselves down so, so often. You know, it's like "nothing fits I'm too big." Its like no, this stuff's too small—it's not you.

The woman that Ella admires is an example of someone who is "in their own right," as Jennifer would say. She is not caught up in consumption or the limitations/standards a consumer society places on her body/identity. This is an opportunity for Ella because she sees the possibility to refashion the meanings of fashions in her shop. Fashion positions the body as an inscribed surface of events and an entity susceptible to the absorption and/or reflection of power (Kroker & Kroker, 1987). It disciplines the body for particular

performances limiting or liberating the body's potential (Foucault, 1984b). Ella is taking the blame off of the woman's body and placing it on the clothes when she says, "You know, it's like "nothing fits I'm too big." It's like no, this stuff's too small—it's not you." In this way, she attempts to liberate this woman's body from the ideals of society and the fashion industry. She is using fashion, which is a medium that individuals use to relate to society (Stafford & Carter, 2006), to re-contour this relationship. As a result, the woman is placed in control of what fashion means and whether or not she accepts the fashion according to how it looks on her body.

The owners situate themselves as teachers and supporters who want to help liberate women from the race to consume. This alternative perspective of fashion reconfigures the meaning of the fashions and brands in secondhand shops. It is no longer a question of what is the best brand or referencing price as an indicator of quality; Jennifer and Ella situate women's personal tastes and the way fashion looks on their bodies as the criteria that qualifies an outfit as great or desirable. They take price and brand out of the equation with an intense focus on women's bodies as an indication of what fashion means. In this way, shoppers are granted greater freedom in determining which fashions are meaningful to them and their body, setting aside the fashion cycle, which tells them which fashions are meaningful and relevant at any given time.

### **Making Shopping Meaningful through Relationships**

In addition to altering shoppers' perspectives on fashion and its meaning, secondhand owners reshape what it means to shop in their shop. Secondhand shopping becomes a social activity, promoting relationships that exist and thrive within



consumption. Amanda says it best, in her curt tones, explaining how relationships fit into her business. “Well, I’ve always been a people person. I’ve always thought that people were the most important thing. I always try to be a good person. Yeah, I hope if nothing else somebody will remember me for that.” Although she does not reflect on relationships beyond this statement, she knows almost everyone who enters her shop and generally rushes to greet them, which often turns into a much longer conversation about family, friends, pets, or sports. Often shoppers will get more than an opportunity to shop when they visit secondhand shops. As Amanda demonstrates, she cares about her consumers and tries to interact with them, learning about their lives beyond consumption. In doing this she makes shopping more than just consuming goods; it becomes an opportunity for interaction. The potential for relationships to form in the midst of consumption also influences how and why individuals shop and even alter the meaning of the fashions they shop for.

### **Shopping for relationships.**

Many of the owners spoke of the importance of relationships in their shop. From what I observed the relationships were not only a part of running the business, but also a source of enjoyment for both owners and shoppers. The centrality of relationships in Jennifer’s shop was the most clear and powerful, as she believes that fostering sincere interaction with her customers is the most important part of her job. Jennifer explains how she relates to and interacts with her consignors and shoppers, demonstrating the effect relationships have on her and her shoppers.

**Jennifer:** Maybe this is really philosophical, but I don't really see myself as selling clothing. It is a much greater picture, providing a service um certainly making a living doing it. However, I can't say that I've ever, and I 'm sure you can see just by the way I am, I have never come into work and people say well how much money do you make? I'm like I don't know that must be a byproduct of what I do. I have never thought about it. You know, one way or another. I mean for me its just amazing how many people touch my life and how many lives I'm able to touch. (Jennifer lifts up the glass on the counter to pull out one of the many cards displayed beneath it. There was a woman's picture on the front of it.) Just like this um lady came it today, and she's a really good consignor um, and I was just talking to her about her daughter, and talking to her blah, blah, blah and she told me that her lovely daughter, that just turned 30, died giving birth. And, you know, you just hug and hold and love just, you know. If I was just corporate and I was just you know selling clothes...I mean this isn't a happy story, but it certainly is an example of just how close you are to people. And you'll see so many things that you'll just go, "Wow, that can happen in a store?" Unbelievable, you know, powerful, neat stuff. But you have that ability if you truly own your own freedom and that true American dream of having your own thing.

Explaining that her shop is not about consumption or fashion even, illuminates the greater purpose and value of connecting with people. The role that fashion plays in this connection is merely peripheral. As Jennifer confirms, relating to people as she does in

her shop is not the norm, alluding to the impersonal nature of most opportunities for consumption (Bauman, 2007). It is especially unheard of in regular, corporate retail settings, because the race to consume dominates individuals' focus. Furthermore, sales associates are trained to make sales; they are not their own boss like Jennifer and are expected to promote consumption. By making this distinction, Jennifer is setting secondhand operations apart from other venues of sales and consumption.

The freedom to put relationships before fashion can only be achieved by owning and operating one's own business. Jennifer continues by sharing how deeply involved these relationships are, illustrating the work that goes into them.

**Jennifer:** In a day at least half or more of the people that come in here know me, I know them, I know their name, they know me they know my name... I know their husbands, I know their daughters, their greatest joys and their deepest sorrows and pains and then the clothes are just sort of the what's outside of what's happening... There's just there's certainly greater thing and I recognize that people come here because they could get used clothes anywhere, but they come here because they can't get what I offer anywhere else or very few places, I mean really if you think about it even though you're young there are few places you can go where people just know everything about you, but it never used to be that way. People were so connected. That's why I think people still come here is because you know they're just—it's just not about clothes.

Jennifer expresses the connections she has with her customers that move beyond the shopping that takes place in her shop. Knowing her shoppers' families and children and

sharing her own life with them demonstrates the effort that Jennifer puts into the relationships she has with her shoppers. As Jennifer admits, it is surprising that such connections can develop in and through a store, a venue of consumption. Bauman (2007) maintains that consumption does not foster enduring relationships, but Jennifer clearly thinks otherwise as she communicates the multifaceted bonds formed in her shop. Jennifer expresses a sense of accomplishment in fostering these relationships, which are characteristic of the secondhand ideology, suggesting that there is work involved. These relationships are not a given, considering that Jennifer feels society has moved away from valuing sincere connections between people.

#### **Sincerity encourages relationships.**

In addition to fostering relationships that develop in the midst of consumption, secondhand shops are unique because they initiate relationships that are founded in sincerity. Relationships and sincerity get lost in liquid modernity as consumption becomes more important than interacting or making connections with other people (Bauman, 2007). Sincere interaction is the catalyst for initiating meaningful interaction in the midst of consumption and lays the foundation for lasting relationships. Ella explains how interactions unfold in her shop and how this separates her shop from other places, “I would say that um, that it is um—genuine.” She continues to say in a rather stuffy tone, pointing her nose upward, “Its not, ‘oh hello darling,” mocking the elite and often scripted attention shoppers receive in department stores. What Ella is mocking is *synthetic personalization* or the mere appearance of sincerely treating people as individuals (Fairclough, 1989). Ella is not interested in “dealing” with or “handling”

people, as synthetic personalization would encourage. Instead, she is interested in helping her shoppers find things that suit their specific lifestyle and body and offer them the opportunity to enter into a relationship. Even beyond consumption shop owners are invested in their shoppers' lives, explains Jennifer, throwing her head back in laughter, "Yeah, I feel like I'm certainly an underpaid psychiatrist..." referring to how her shop is a gathering place that requires her emotional attention and the ability to foster relationships. Shop owners are committed to moving beyond formality and insincerity to real engagement with their customers. In this way, they are also challenging Bauman's (2007) suggestion that relationships are devalued due to the overwhelming desire to view everything, including individuals, as commodities.

Sincerity is the component of relationships that are formed in and through secondhand shops that make them different from the interaction that takes place in retail venues. Sincere relationships are a hallmark of the secondhand shopping experience. Shoppers and owners are getting more than just the exchange of money and goods out of secondhand shops. They are building a network of shoppers, sellers, and owners who care about one another and chose to take their shared interest in fashion as an opportunity to connect. As strange as it may sound these relationships make fashion meaningful, according to shop owners. Although they could not articulate exactly why or how this is so, Ella says it best.

**Ella:** Um, I think people feel comfortable here and like it here and, you know, as an environment, as a whole, not just to find a good deal or whatever...I would hate to say all these clothes look better because we're nice people, you know I

mean, but I think it is about the experience. That's a great question. And then I think it becomes individual. I think some people are looking for a really great deal and aren't concerned about how they're treated. Some people are even frightened by how friendly we are.

Ella suggests that the fashions in her shop look better because of the way she treats her customers. She says this jokingly, but does admit that the experience shoppers have in her store does contribute to the meaning of fashions in her shop. Her shoppers are experiencing the secondhand ideology during their time in the shop. Ella is taking advantage of the potential to change the meaning of fashion as it moves through her shop to a new audience, who is treated with respect.

### **Community: Uniting in Shopping Habits**

The sincerity that distinguishes relationships formed in secondhand shops also connects a larger community of shoppers. The networks formed in secondhand shops create a community. Shoppers are drawn together in shared interests and shopping habits, transforming secondhand shops into gathering places for women to socialize and build relationships. This sense of community gives women another reason to shop secondhand shops. In addition to the opportunity to consume differently, owners view their shops as a place where women can come to be affirmed and valued by other women. This alters the purpose of shopping, making it more than just consuming fashion. However, consumption is still an important part of this community. It is just that the fashions consumers shop for and the venue they do it in are viewed as opportunities to connect.

**A place for women to come together.**

As I talked with Ella about the role relationships played in her business, Ella shared some insight into why she decided to quit her job in retail to open a resale shop. Considering our conversation carefully, Ella crossed her hand on her stomach and brought the other to her chin.

**Ella:** Well, I think it was um...I wanted the relationship with the customer to be more intimate. I—you know—not the typical corporate rules. Although, I met a lot of really nice people and have kept in contact and been good friends that I met in that world.

Ella implies that her transition to secondhand was an opportunity to form and maintain more meaningful relationships with her customers. These “rules” and “lack of intimacy” upheld in corporate operations allude to the norms of liquid modernity that place such stock in consumption, devaluing relationships. She goes on to explain how she has made her shop different than her experiences in retail. Ella’s goal is to create a balance between shopping and socializing/relationships. As we continued to talk I noticed that these relationships were dependent on the shop’s environment, as well as its owner.

**Ella:** Yeah, the relationships are very important because one of the things I want for people who come through the door is for them to have an experience here...not...the exchange of money and goods. But I know that when I first started I was newly married and I was having children. And just communicating with other women through this venue, you learn a lot about life. And what...you share ideas. Um, I had a girlfriend that used to refer to our store as the, you know,

“Female Barbershop.” You know where um, she had grown up in her grandpa’s barbershop. Um, you know she felt like she could come in and not only shop but talk to a bunch of women... We have a lot of goodwill. I have people that have been shopping with me for 17 years. They talk about watching my kids grow up. You know. We know each other.

Ella situates these social activities as central to her shop, even more central than the exchange of “money and goods.” She is careful to mention that the relationships that she develops and enjoys in her shop are experienced reciprocally by her shoppers.

Beyond the relationships she has benefited from in her shop, Ella describes a community that is composed of similar bonds. She addresses this community as she compares her shop to a barbershop. The concept of a “female barbershop” is a reference to the social space that is generally associated with Black communities (Alexander, 2003). The reference the shopper was using to tell Ella how important her shop is in her life is one of camaraderie, discourse, and comfort. The shopper was framing Ella’s secondhand shop as a place in everyday life where relationships could be formed and attended to and individuals share and negotiate culture (Alexander, 2003), in this case as consumers and women. This reference gives shape to the experiences and bonds that develop in and through secondhand shops. They are meaningful, valuable, and localized to the shop. Also, the fact that Ella chose to retell this narrative she heard from a shopper shows that she values her shop in a similar way. She proudly identifies the community that develops in her shop.



Amanda demonstrates that her shop is a gathering place for women in an interaction that unfolded with a customer during our interview. She communicates to the customer that her shop is not only for or about consumption. Shoppers should feel comfortable just dropping by to catch up with others in the community. She builds a sense of solidarity with her shopper, welcoming her into the community whether or not she is able to participate in consumption.

**Amanda:** Hey you where have you been. Did you know Pat was comin in?

Well, I was kinda thinking you knew because she is gonna be here soon. You have not been in, in awhile?

**Customer:** I'm broke.

**Amanda:** You and me both, but that does not mean you can't kill some time with us, all right? We gotta all stick together. Just 'cause we're broke doesn't mean I don't need entertainment.

Amanda considers the woman's position and invites her to become part of her community despite a situation that prohibits her from purchasing. This again illuminates the importance of coming together as women over consumption. Amanda *interpellates*, or calls women into women into the secondhand ideology by situating them as subjects (Althusser, 1969), which in this case are shoppers and members of a community of women. Although it is obvious that Ella and Amanda try to engage their shoppers beyond the act of consumption, they call shoppers into a new structure of fashion, where women are valued, and interactions are sincere. It is the sense of community that makes secondhand shopping not necessarily about shopping.

### ***Communitas.***

Within the community that secondhand shopping creates, the shop becomes a place that initiates and encourages individuals to connect on a level that is rare in liquid modernity. As shoppers spend time in secondhand shops women open themselves to the input of other women and share their stories with one another. These relationships (whether brief or lasting) form a community of shoppers and owners, who come together in and through secondhand shops. Secondhand shoppers, in the context of the secondhand shop and the community that develops there, are uniting in *communitas*, a deep and spontaneous coming together, letting go of the norms and circumstances that govern interaction in a particular setting, including differences and hierarchies (Madison, 2005). It is an essential coming together that is not recognized formally and identities are united with immediacy; individuals are treated as equals (Madison, 2005). More specifically, shoppers are uniting in *normative communitas*, which occurs in subcultures and encourages a spontaneous coming together on a regular basis (Madison, 2005). Rather than being a rare occasion, secondhand shoppers continue to connect with one another and owners each time they visit secondhand shops even though they do not necessarily maintain *normative communitas* outside of the shop. This makes what is happening in secondhand shops different and possibly more complex than a relationship.

The foundation for these moments of *communitas* are the shared perspectives these women have according to Ella who notices that her shoppers have a lot in common.

**Ella:** Well, you know, that brings up this point that in general people that come here um tend to kinda be like minded. I mean a little bit more free and

independent thinkers. And I have often said, “is it the clothes that attract them or is it the neighborhood we’re in?”, but I think, I have been in three different neighborhoods and I find the same thing, you know, the majority of people. Like repeaters. We have like, I’ve never done a study, but I betcha our politics are similar, our religions, you know, all that stuff, what makes you a---whatever are similar.

Ella’s shop attracts like-minded women, who are open to new ways of consuming and meeting new people. Jennifer goes a step further, offering how she sees shoppers enacting the *communitas* that comes from the commonality of enjoying secondhand shopping.

**Jennifer:** They (shoppers) will kind of talk to each other and they’ll come out and try things on and ask each other what you think. Sometimes women leave here and go and have coffee together, they met here, they exchange phone numbers, I’ve seem ‘em talk about things, I’ve introduced people here to each other that I...I mean many, many, times so it, that’s why I said it just becomes so much more...

In a world where consumption is used to formulate and reformulate self-identity, the act of consuming becomes a sacred activity and the retail venues where this sacred activity ensues become sacred places (Cusack & Digance, 2008). Instead of being concerned with holding certain values or being members of close groups, individuals look at themselves and their identity as owners of logos and regular patrons in venues of consumption (Cusack & Digance, 2008).

However, *communitas* is possible in venues of consumption as individuals transition from their infancy as consumers to managing their own identity through consumption. Almost all individuals experience this transition in a liquid modern world, as individuals learn to construct themselves by picking and choosing from the options that society supplies (Bauman, 2007). During this transition, the newly developing consumers relate and connect with a world of shoppers, giving them a sense of belonging (Bauman, 2007). *Communitas* is occurring in secondhand shops for similar reasons, as women disregard what society tells them about secondhand shopping as unacceptable, out-dated means of managing identity. Secondhand shoppers are learning to “come into their own right,” as Jennifer would say. As a result, they are united in their liberation from societal constraints. Secondhand shops may not be the only place that this type of *communitas* can occur, but it certainly attracts individuals who share similar perspectives of consumption and are open to putting relationships before consumption. Ella takes this *communitas* beyond shopping/consumption and relates on a much deeper level, as women in a world of consumption—aware of the norms of a liquid modern world, but unwilling to accept them without hesitation or question.

After spending time in these secondhand shops and with their owners, it is clear to me that they are in some ways distancing themselves from the normal flows of a liquid modern world by practicing a deeper, more sincere interaction and commitment to relationships as they reframe instances of consumption and abate the race to consume. The way that owners do this is by using their perspectives on identity, relationships, community, and relationships to connect women. Owners encourage shoppers to relate to

them as well as other shoppers, making shopping more than just searching for fashions. Again the fashions in secondhand shops are made peripheral and shopping for fashion becomes an opportunity to unite with others in a similar identity.

### **Secondhand Fashions and Meaning Management**

Secondhand fashion is an accumulation of narratives (Silverman, 1994). In addition to brands and style, these narratives give fashion meaning both socially and personally. Because secondhand fashions have moved through more hands and venues than retail fashions, they are more complex in their meanings. Fashion often comes to secondhand shops with narratives from previous owners that owners then have the opportunity to conceal or pass along to shoppers. In addition to previous owner's narratives, shop owners have to deal with the narratives and values attached to certain brands. Secondhand shop owners have the challenge of dealing with these meanings and presenting them in a way that promotes and perpetuates the ideology of secondhand shopping in order to foster the relationships, community, and environment described above.

#### **Negotiation of accumulated narratives.**

The narratives attached to fashions often get told as the garments trade hands from owner to seller and sometimes from seller to new owner. Ella explains how this works and which stories are worth telling.

**Ella:** Um well, I don't ever reveal names, but we have some celebrities bring their stuff here or you know I guess you'd call 'em celebrities. This town is not very full of celebrities, but um I don't...I guess if it's an older piece or if its, you

know, an interesting story, you know, I might say oh that belonged to an Opera singer, you know, or something like that, but not um yeah, yeah....I mean or yeah I wouldn't say oh she brought that in because she had a terrible time in it—no, but um, yeah no, there're some stories

Ella suggests that certain stories make garments more appealing or interesting, choosing which ones are beneficial for her to share with her shoppers. She becomes the gatekeeper of the narratives, separating the good from the bad. By telling a narrative to or keeping it from shoppers, shop owners gain the power to create new meanings for the fashions in their shop.

Shoppers are either free to attach their own meanings to secondhand garments, possibly romanticizing the function and value of the or they are start from the narratives that Ella attaches to them in her shop environment. Amanda avoids the complications of narratives by ignoring them all together.

**Amanda:** I mean, I don't really like to like get personal stories attached to clothing. I think it should be anonymous because I want people to feel like they're shopping in a regular store and there is no attachment to anything else about what they're gonna buy. It's about them now. It's not about anybody or anything else. I don't even acknowledge it. No. I mean you know its like, you know, what you have and, you know, what you're selling and other than that you know its about the person that buys it and loves to wear it.

Concealing meaning by not retelling the narratives or stories that they are delivered to the shop with is a way of making new meanings for secondhand fashions. This includes not

only the previous owners' stories of how, why, or where they got the garment, but also the stories of the previous venue it was sold in (although this may be evident from the garment's label). By ignoring the previous owner and the wear and tear that may come with their story, the garment becomes a fresh slate for new narratives to be cast onto. As Amanda asserts, want her shoppers to be able love and wear the fashions in her shop as if they were new, free of any implications of having a previous owner.

### **Maintaining brand meaning and controlling value.**

Although none of the owners overtly highlight their role in creating new meaning for the fashion in their shops, each of the owners demonstrated ways in which they work to make the garments meaningful. In order to do this, the owners first establish authority over the garments and the value that is assigned to them. This is most clearly done through monetary value. Most of the shops have some sort system that reduces price as time goes on. For example, Simply Seconds reduces things on a monthly basis beginning with a 20% discount after the garment has been in the shop for one month. As time passes the garments are discounted up to 50%. In addition to this practice, all of the shops have sales on a regular basis. It is most often an additional 20% and usually corresponds with a seasonal change that requires changing the type of fashions for sale.

Shop owners are able to manipulate the value of fashion, but at the same time there is a respect for high-end brands. Shop owners recognize how highly desirable some high-end brands are and the classic appeal that will almost never go out of style. These fashions are never discounted. This is the owners' way of recognizing some brands and their standards for quality above others. While answering a question about the longevity

of some brands appeal, Amanda calls over to one of her customers in the dressing room mentioning that some people are always on the hunt for these lasting brands that produce lasting styles. She talks about the customer in the dressing room's love for Chanel, as her customer shouts confirmation from within the dressing room.

**Amanda:** Yeah you know and those are like super classic clothes so like those defiantly have more of a life than you know like other labels by, I mean those will be in style for ten, fifteen years where other labels are dated in a couple years.

Amanda respects high-end designers, quality, and classic designs by not discounting the prices. She maintains their integrity by not making them too easily accessible even though they are heavily discounted from retail prices. For example, I noticed a Bottega Veneta wool sweater with a price tag of almost \$400, while the original tags read over \$1,000. It had a red slash through its arrival date in the shop. It was not ever going to be discounted because of the brand, quality, condition, and fact that it still had original tags on it. Not lowering the price as time went on demonstrates Amanda's knowledge of brand and brand power/desirability. She works in the fashion industry and knows that she can make money on this garment; she knows what is a reasonable price. In this way, Amanda subscribes to the pressures of a liquid modern world, as she relinquishes control of what the garment means and its value, succumbing to power and value of particular brands in society.

Another way that Amanda deals with the responsibility of respecting the power of certain brands is by making all women feel comfortable among the fine garments and labels that hang in her shop. She maintains this respect by teaching individuals the



qualities that constitute high-end brands so that they can enjoy the benefit of fine fabrics, construction, and fit.

**Amanda:** Yeah, I know people they'll say, "I don't know one label from another," but if you make them put on a really great, quality piece of clothing, they can feel the difference. They can just like tell the difference between their Wal-Mart jacket and this really incredible you know like label and like garment. They're always amazed. I mean its impossible not to be able to tell. It's like night and day. Well, there are people who never really paid attention and don't really, you know, like care either way, but it's pretty easy to like teach them immediately how different and how much better it is.

Through managing prices and educating shoppers, shop owners are balancing the tension of maintaining brand power in society, while making them more accessible and less intimidating. Once the shoppers are educated, they know what to look for and the rationale behind high-end fashion's high price tags. This new meaning and new accessibility melts together the social class niches that are no longer apparent in a liquid modern world (Bauman, 2007). Secondhand shops work to make these garments a possibility for more women than the original designer or brand intended. In this instance the shoppers' bodies and knowledge are contextualizing the fashions and giving them meaning beyond brand recognition. Secondhand shop owners must manage this tension between accessibility and quality by respecting fashion, how it is made, and what it is worth. In doing this shop owners are negotiating how shoppers understand the garments in their shop. They are also recognizing the liquid modern standards that give fashions

worth including brand and style, but recontextualizing them so that, at the very least, women are not intimidated by the fashions in the shop.

## **Conclusion**

Secondhand shopping may focus on relationships and accessibility more than other opportunities for consumption, but that does not mean that it is any less about identity or consumption. Shop owners still rely on consumption for their livelihood and still strive to help women construct an identity through fashion. However, they depart from liquid modernity as they value people before consumption and want women to have positive, encouraging experiences in their shops. In a liquid modern world that values people, products, and activities only as far as they help construct individual identity, relationships are devalued and effort is placed elsewhere. This, however, is not the case in secondhand shops. Shop owners put their energy to creating a comfortable, engaging shopping environment, building relationships, and community, which alter what it means to shop and how shoppers view the fashions being sold. Owners work to foster consumption that operates from a different ideological perspective, a secondhand ideology. As a result the fashions in these shops come to reflect this ideology and come to mean different things to their new owners.

The rhetoric of the fashions associated with secondhand shops are different than the fashions that are at the forefront of the fashion cycle, including those fashions found in upscale boutiques, department store, and malls. Secondhand fashions mean something different to those who sell it, as well as because of those who sell it. Because fashion is rife with meaning and implications that are developed and manipulated in the context of

secondhand shops, secondhand fashion constitutes a material rhetoric (Dickson, 1999). Material rhetoric, and thus fashion, is a point at which multiple discourses (both visual and linguistic) intersect with and diverge from one another, fostering multiple meanings (Dickson, 1999), including those secondhand shop owners assign to them in their shop.

Fashion means something different in the context of secondhand shops, because its meaning is altered through the women and discourses that surround it purchase it, look at it, and market it. Goods for consumption are shaped by the places and people they flow through (Deluca, 1999). Because secondhand fashion no longer flows through the venues dictated by the brand or designer, it becomes the owner's job to contextualize the garments and fashions, including what they mean, how they are perceived, and how individuals use them. The venue, discourse, and relationships through which secondhand fashion flows shapes its meaning and why the women who shop secondhand shops and buy secondhand clothes. In secondhand shops, "Discourses are not made of immaterial ideas, but rather of material flows of symbols and images circulating through social spaces...and human bodies..." (Condit, 2008, p. 385). This means that secondhand fashion's meaning is the result of the discourse and norms that are generated from the secondhand ideology.

Shop owners take advantage of the power they gain from running their own shops by reprioritizing the values associated with consumption. This also changes the meaning of shopping by creating the possibility for relationships and community to thrive. Of particular importance is how the shop owners help write the *rhetoric of display*, or how fashions appear and what it means when it in their shops (Blair & Michel, 2007). How

shop owners encourage shoppers to use fashions to adorn their bodies recontextualizes fashion further, as shop owners try to put shoppers in control of what is fashion according to their bodies and lifestyles. In the secondhand industry this means respecting women's bodies, not trying to make them into something they are not. These owners, especially Ella and Jennifer, strive to serve women honestly and to the best of their ability—as friends, rather than sales women. This approach to fashion helps to contextualize the fashions in their shops within a relationship of care and concern. Shop owners work to attach the secondhand ideology to these fashions and their shop giving fashion new meaning and altering what it means to go shopping.

### **Chapter Three: The Art of Secondhand Shopping**

I met Tamera in her furniture shop to talk about her secondhand shopping habits. When I arrived, she appeared from the back room. Her hair was tossed up in a ponytail on the top of her head. She sported an oversized blazer with rolled up sleeves, revealing the equally over sized black and white striped oxford shirt beneath it. Her outfit was complimented by black leggings and black heels. Her neck was adorned with a colorful scarf. I could tell just by looking at her she had a style all her own and was not afraid to display her unique taste to those around her. We sat down on some of the furniture in her shop and began to converse. I soon learned that she had been secondhand shopping for much of her life, thanks her mother, who also shared a love for secondhand shopping. Tamera came to use secondhand shopping out of necessity, but grew to love it as a pastime. She had put a lot of time into thinking about what she wanted to tell me in this interview, she confessed, and it showed in her thoughtful responses. Towards the beginning of our conversation she explained the significance of secondhand shopping in her life and style.

**Tamera:** Your life is about having things that you like. Not having what everybody else has. And I just have felt different my entire life beginning with my name, the way I was raised, my appearance, I don't want to be--I have never had the option to be like everyone else and I think I have spread that throughout everything in my life from... my house, to the way I dress, to the way I express

myself....Uh, again this kind of shopping [secondhand shopping] is a matter of educating yourself and many people buy clothes so they have something to wear.

I buy clothes for their self-expression.

Tamera is different and she uses secondhand shopping to convey that. It is a tool for her, a way of expressing herself and living differently. According to Tamera, secondhand shopping matters; it is a part of her life that helps contribute to her uniqueness and allows her to express herself in a way that sets her apart from others.

Tamera and the other shoppers in this chapter look to secondhand shopping as a way of getting what they desire and need to construct their identity in an unconventional way so that how they shop also contributes to their sense of self. The secondhand shoppers in this chapter use secondhand shopping to distance themselves from the norms of liquid modernity, providing them with the goods and education they need to cultivate truly unique identities that exist, not in brand labels as Bauman (2007) suggests, but in creativity and know-how.

Tamera is only one example of how secondhand fashion functions uniquely in shoppers' lives. However, her desire to use secondhand fashion and shopping to get nice things and express herself is a common sentiment among the shoppers interviewed for this project. In this chapter, I introduce the shoppers, Mary Ann, Karen, and Amy (in addition to Tamera's account above) and why they use secondhand fashion. Then, I explore what secondhand shopping means to these shoppers and how secondhand fashions are integrated into their lives. Next, I delve into how these women use and do not use secondhand fashion and the act of shopping to construct an identity. Finally, I

unpack the ways that secondhand shopping counters the unreflexive, liquid modern consumer, by parsing out how shoppers practice reflexive consumption.

### **Meet the Shoppers: Why they Seek Out Secondhand Fashion**

Each of these shoppers expresses the conditions in their lives that have led them to secondhand shopping. Often times it was a combination of relationships with their mothers, female friends, or necessity that made secondhand shops an option for consumption. I think it is important to recognize that each of these women was taught that secondhand shopping was a viable means of creating identity and carrying out consumption. They had to learn to appreciate and participate in secondhand shopping because it is plagued by the societal stigma of being less desirable than brand new goods. Each of these women takes a different approach to secondhand shopping, using it for different reasons and to obtain different goods and styles. Their accounts of secondhand shopping support the idea that secondhand is what one makes it, highlighting the element of open-mindedness and creativity that it takes to utilize this type of shopping.

Karen, who was introduced to secondhand shopping through some friends and has stuck with it since then, speaks to her need for the secondhand and how she came to see secondhand fashions as an option for her lifestyle. As I sat with Karen in her office she explained to me when she became a secondhand shopper and what she has come to appreciate about it.

**Karen:** Um, I moved to Cleveland, Ohio about 20 years ago and had never been thrift store shopping before that, but had close friends who did . . . . [I] never could make enough money to buy things. I had two children. I always felt like I

was doing sort of TJ Maxx kind of shopping, but never finding things that I really liked. And I don't like looking like everybody else. So, I discovered consignment shops at that point. And what I discovered is I love beautiful fabric. I love natural fibers, and I like wearing relatively classic clothes and in Cleveland there were people with lots and lots of money who would wear things once or not at all and take things to the consignment shops. So I started shopping consignment shops and I also started looking for the sales at consignment shops because I was not willing to spend \$150 or \$300 for something—so that's when I started.

Karen was introduced to secondhand shopping by her friends, opening up a whole new world of consumption. This type of shopping allowed Karen to shop for things she could really enjoy. She did not have to settle for wearing TJ Maxx fashions anymore or looking like others. Secondhand fashion offered an opportunity to look different than others and afford luxuries that her budget would not normally allow her to have.

MaryAnn offers a bit of a different perspective, as she does not try to look different or unique through secondhand shopping. For her, it is just the thrill of the hunt and the practicality of saving money that attracts her to secondhand shopping. As I talked with Mary Ann in an empty café at her workplace, I learned what she considered a bargain and what shopping meant to her. Her southern accent charmed me as she spoke softly and quickly. With her arms crossed, I could tell she was a little bit uncertain about the information she was sharing with me. I got the impression she was worried about what I would think of her intensity and dedication secondhand shopping, which she later



informed me she preferred to keep a secret unless she was in the company of another secondhand shopper. Secure with her taste and use of secondhand shops, Mary Ann explains her rationale behind her clothing choices.

**Mary Ann:** I'm pretty classic. I don't, I'm not funky, I don't think that I could pull that. I like clean-tailored, but that probably comes from my mother. She was raised, she has a corporate job and that's what was acceptable. If it looks like I do (shop at department stores)—fine. But no, no. I don't go for any like off kilter look if you will, you know, that I could only find if I had gone secondhand or completely rehabbed by threading and sewing and whatnot.

Although Mary Ann does not get caught up in portraying herself as wealthy or unique in her fashion sense, she situates secondhand shopping as a way of clothing her body that keeps her look current and classic.

However, her satisfaction comes from a different aspect of the secondhand, as she explains the savings that she could not find in any other venue of consumption. Mary Ann talks fondly of her mother, her shopping partner, as she explains how she came to love getting deals.

**Mary Ann:** She hates the mall. She hates anything with normal prices and even sale prices aren't enthralling to her because if she is used to a...what percentage are we looking at like 100% to 200% difference between what she pays...or what they'd retail for then its not fun to her so we only stay in areas where we can find some great deal.

Mary Ann's main purpose for secondhand shopping is to get deals, more so than keeping current or developing personal style. She and her mother get great satisfaction from not paying full price. She knows that the fashions (and other goods) that she and her mother purchase are significantly lower in price than retail stores and very similar in appearance. I never got the impression that Mary Ann was trying to make any statement against consumerism or capitalism, but it is interesting to note that she identifies as a consumer with the qualifier that she is a particularly savvy consumer, a skilled bargain hunter. Even though her shopping habits are not valued by a liquid modern society, Mary Ann still subscribes to consumption as a lifestyle.

Amy uses secondhand shopping for different reasons than Tamera, Karen and Mary Ann. Instead of money or uniqueness being her biggest concern, she is focused on fitting in with women who are wealthy. She finds herself in this crowd often with her work and social life and does not want to feel like she is different from them. For her, secondhand shopping is a way of getting what society tells you cannot have. In addition, it is worth noting that Amy utilized secondhand shopping the least out of all the shoppers I talked to. When I met up with Amy for coffee, she was clad in her tailored work out clothes and a navy blue designer coat, with flower printed lapels. She looked chic even after just having worked out. Despite all that was going on around us, Amy was extremely focused and appeared a bit nervous, frazzled from the anticipation of the questions to come.

**Amy:** It's exciting to look and be your best and fashion is an expression and can do that and sometimes, and even today, I don't like the restrictions that I feel put

financial constraints. That's why consignment is, I wouldn't say this is a value of mine, but in general consignment gives that availability. I've had huge issues, and so many other people do, too, with um uh class and cliques and being—fitting in. I work, or used to, where there is quite a bit of wealth; and I love brands. It's been a huge temptation... It's also who I have to be in front of; for me, dressing is for other people, if I really am good at it.

Amy's use of secondhand shops is a result of financial constrictions. She looks at secondhand shopping as an opportunity to get around the restraints of her budget and obtain the nice things she desires. She, however, does not recognize secondhand shopping as a first resort, but it is an option. As Amy explains her orientation to fashion, her body, and socioeconomic class, she reveals the opportunity to elevate one's social standing or at least the appearance of it through secondhand fashions. Amy uses secondhand fashion to shape her body, transforming and improving it, so it will be accepted by elite others. Her body is subject to the power of the fashion system, as she uses fashion to discipline her body to appear elite and wealthy (Rabinow, 1984).

Although all of these women use secondhand shopping for slightly different reasons, they are all hoping that the fashions, as well as the means through which they obtained them will prove useful in constructing their identities. More than anything, though, these women are proud of their shopping smarts, as they avoid retail situations in order to get luxurious, well-made garments. Their ability to make secondhand garments meaningful and transform the act of shopping into a facet of their identity situates how

they shop as more important than what they shop for. Making secondhand shopping and fashion meaningful is an individual task, which, as it turns out, is particularly rigorous.

### **The Meaning of Secondhand Shopping, A Treasure Hunt**

As these women's narratives develop, they not only demonstrate the meaning of secondhand fashion in their lives, but also what secondhand fashion offers them in terms of pleasure. These shoppers are not concerned as much with what they purchase as they are with how they consume and what they are able to do with it. When defining what secondhand shopping means, shoppers most often turned to how their shopping was done to explain what it was and why they enjoyed it. Their accounts of treasure hunts and the role of creativity in shopping answers the question, what does secondhand shopping mean to those who regularly participate in it? When telling narratives about what secondhand shopping means to them, it became clear that the process is what gives meaning to this the secondhand, the goods are only secondary. In essence it is the challenge of shopping and one's ability to make good choices that makes secondhand shopping meaningful and even recreational.

#### **Defining treasures.**

Despite their differences these women are united in the "treasure hunt," which is about a quest to save money, while still enjoying nice things. To secondhand shoppers, shopping is a hunt for treasures. Although there is no map, no "X" that marks the spot, and no race to find a designated treasure, secondhand shoppers know that there is always something good out there to be stumbled upon. Their treasure hunt is not specific or limited explains Tamera:

**Tamera:** Because you know I don't do this every Saturday, obviously and so but a find is a find. But I don't think I specifically look for things like a white ruffled blouse, no I'm not going to do that, but I might find an all lace blouse that I love. But it's the element of surprise. The thrill of the hunt.

Tamera speaks to the limited time she has to participate in secondhand shopping, but she suggests that there is always treasure out there to be found. Even more than the garment that Tamera scores, it is the treasure hunt that excites her, the journey that leads finding something interesting. Tamera explains where her notion of treasures came from. With excitement in her wide, dark, eyes Tamera excitedly and carefully shared with me her definition

**Tamera:** Well, I think at my age, my age has part to do with what is a treasure to me...um...my mother lives on an island in the Puget Sound, Whidbey Island, and it's full of—it probably—it has a very high socioeconomic mix. Probably some very wealthy people lived on Whidbey Island at some point, maybe 50 to 80 years ago. And when my mother moved there 40 years ago she began shopping in the secondhand stores there. Um, we all associate kind of Junior League thrift stores um we think about um older people's junk if you will. This was kind of in the day before anyone thought that they could call a garage sale an estate sale. My mother really did go to estate sales and my mother began sending me these BEAUTIFUL hand made linens with handmade lace that were heavy cotton, beautiful top sheets, um things that never in my life would my budget allowed me

to have. And so she was very careful she would say, “Well you know I don’t want you to think that I’m just sending you something used. It’s just beautiful.”

For Tamera, a treasure is something that is beautiful and normally out of her reach financially. She recognizes that some of her treasures are junk to others, highlighting the object’s fall from popularity. Her definition of treasure is being able to see value and beauty in things that are no longer thought useful or beautiful by their previous owners and often society.

Another element of the treasure that shoppers spoke of was the price. Karen clearly connects the concept of finding a bargain to finding a treasure as she describes a particularly successful shopping trip.

**Karen:** So it’s a pantsuit. It was thrift store price \$70, but it was on half price because everything in the store was half price. Then I found this blouse that I have on, which was \$7.50. And something else, I can’t remember what the other thing was. Something else I got there. So in an hour I found three really good pieces that were things that uh I knew I’d wear, comfortable...oooo and a belt. That’s what it was. It was a belt. I was looking for a belt for a particular dress. So you know for under \$50 I found three really nice pieces that work with my wardrobe, were not too expensive and it’s that, you know, the hunt—I found something really good.

Even though Karen does not call her finds treasures she did mention that she had to hunt for them. Her excitement and the value she feels she found are evident in her account. Her treasures are defined by their potential to be used in daily life. She knew she would

use these purchases and that they would be comfortable. In addition, she also makes note of the prices and how much she saved, suggesting that the price plays a role in defining a treasure.

Treasures are not always obvious, but they can be found almost anywhere, from estate sales to garage sales. To locate a treasure is not always an easy task, especially when one is shopping at a secondhand shop like the Salvation Army, which is a place where digging for treasure is especially challenging and important. Mary Ann tells of a pair of boots she found, a treasure that she loves.

**Mary Ann:** I have some boots I have worn um literally once a week, well in the winter obviously, that I got at the Salvation Army here in Denver. And they were new, I mean well, I think they were. They were in good condition. They didn't have any wear on the bottoms. Yeah, so those have become my staples. ... You have to dig and you have to really scour through and it just kinda lands there. I think probably in a bag of clothes that you know somebody is just unloading and its like why take that one piece to a consignment store so it gets mixed in. But you have to do a lot of work to get it.

Mary Ann describes the hunt to find the treasure, suggesting that one should never discount a secondhand venue as having potential treasures. Good finds can be found anywhere; there is no way of knowing. Mary Ann talks of her boots as a treasure because they were useful, practical, and in great condition. She demonstrates the importance of having an open mind as she scoured through all of the junk at the Salvation Army,

knowing that something really great could have gotten mixed in with the loads of other stuff. This takes patience and work.

**Treasure hunting as work.**

Treasures do not just appear; one must endure the laborious task of hunting, a form of work. Amy's account of finding treasures focuses on the work and time that goes into locating them. She is impatient with the process, but once she finds treasures the hunt becomes worth it. For her, the hunt is only worthwhile if it is fruitful.

**Amy:** No, I actually uhhh...I don't like putting the time into it (shopping). That's why I don't cook. I like things easy, but when I do discover an amazing find....I mean I bought some Prada shoes that had never been worn at Rhonda's Resale that same day that I got the bag (that she had showed me earlier).

In both Mary Ann and Amy's account of the treasure hunt, the hunt is a means to an end that is made more rewarding because of the effort and time that went into it. The effort, which Tamera calls the "thrill of the hunt," is a part of the recreation of shopping secondhand, whereas Amy does not find pleasure in the hunt unless she has something to show for it. I attribute this difference to the degree to which these two shoppers are caught up in the race to consume. Amy appears to be right in the middle of the race to consume, not having the time or patience to enjoy the process (Bauman, 2007). She only cares about the goods that come out of the process. Tamera, on the other hand, relishes in the process of secondhand shopping, loving when she finds treasures, but also loving the hunt.



Each of the shoppers suggests that to find a treasure, one must have the time and patience to hunt, dig, and scour until something spectacular, out of the ordinary, or a really great deal reveals itself. These shoppers all allude to the work that goes into finding a treasure. It is important to note the relationship between a treasure and a “good find” as these three shoppers spoke about their shopping habits. Tamera alludes to this difference as she tells of a time when secondhand shopping was not work, suggesting that it has become work because good finds are now more rare.

**Tamera:** I have kind of addressed clothing because that’s where my quest as a secondhand shopper began, but home furnishing, accents, baby clothes. And as I’ve gotten older I have come to appreciate that the things that I was able to find easily, in um thrift stores or secondhand shopping, are becoming more and more rare: handmade things, things that are perhaps mid-century, maybe from the 50’s, that sort of thing. And um in fairness um this kind of shopping takes a lot of time and so it’s recreational for me as well.

Tamera explains that good finds are nice things that are considered to be of good quality and value. For example, hand-made items used to be good finds, but not challenging to find. As Tamera said earlier without much excitement, “A find is a find,” suggesting that just finding a good buy is not very exciting or meaningful. Today Tamera must embark on a hunt to find these rare treasures, and it is the work that gives the treasures additional value and interest. When quality and value are coupled with the thrill of the hunt or the effort to locate them, they become treasures. Treasures are out there all one has to do is

look for them, work to sift through the other less valuable goods that bury the treasure.

Treasures are earned, not just found.

The way that these women describe what a treasure is makes it clear that treasures separate secondhand shopping from retail settings. Retail stores are generally organized, have duplicate garments and sizes, and everything is in good condition. In secondhand shopping none of these norms hold true, which is where shoppers' work becomes evident. They have to dig through racks of garments that are different colors, sizes, textures, fabrics, and brands. There is little organization and it is not clear what the next rack will contain. This is not to say that all consumption is not work to create an identity (Bauman, 2007). Secondhand shoppers' work, however, is different in its intensity, the time it takes, and also its purpose. Their work requires finding things that will help them construct an identity and serve them and their lifestyles in a way that they see fit, not that society prescribes.

The treasure hunt is a process; it is an explanation of how shopping is executed and the aspects of it that make it enjoyable. However, it is only the first part of the shopping process. After treasures are located there is the potential for goods to be creatively altered, which to Tamera is also recreational. Tamera explains, "...its uh gratifying to me to find a treasure so it's recreational for me as well as it feeds my creative mojo, too. But it's the element of surprise, the thrill of the hunt," that attracts her to secondhand shopping. Besides affirming what other shoppers have already mentioned, Tamera adds another element to the concept of finding a treasure—creativity.

### **Creativity.**

Not only do shoppers put a lot of time into finding treasures, they also put significant effort into reworking the meaning and use of the goods they purchase in secondhand shops. Although this is not always necessary or desirable, it is an option because the garment or good was inexpensive. Mary Ann laments a sweater that was sacrificed to the dryer, illuminating the disposable nature of secondhand goods.

**Mary Ann:** Its hard, and then I ruin them a lot of times. I ruin, I have ruined a fantastic um what is it called—I'll think of it. Um long almost a knitted...yeah, I washed it and it was dry clean only....mmhmmm...and it looks like it is for a child now. Great find. Great piece. And I destroyed it. And I guess because I didn't pay, you know, \$400 for it—no big deal!

Not having to worry about maintaining a \$400 garment or ruining it during daily life opens up the possibility for secondhand fashion to be lived in, worn, and experimented with. The price is what determines the freedom secondhand shoppers feel when manipulating fashions and goods they find in secondhand shops. It does not matter if the fashion is a designer brand or a fine fabric, if the price is low then secondhand shoppers do not hesitate to rework the goods into something new or toss them in the dryer in this case. They use this freedom they feel to create new, unique fashions from pre-owned goods.

Creativity becomes part of the skill that can make secondhand shopping even more productive in constructing a truly individualistic image/identity. These women make secondhand garments work for them by reassigning meaning and function (De

Certeau, 1984). Tamera and Mary Ann were the only shoppers to demonstrate an extreme element of creativity; they also seemed to have the most experience secondhand shopping. The possibility of reworking meaning and use helps explain why Tamera believes that secondhand goods are an opportunity to shop for things that are “one-of-a-kind,” whether it is a garment that she reconstructs herself or something for sale that another individual has hand crafted or designed. In hushed tones and with arm movements as graceful as a ballerina Tamera illuminates the luxury and beauty that she sees in secondhand goods.

**Tamera:** ...I found that I wanted things that were unique, one-of-a-kind, had something that was special about them. Yes, I can go to Old Navy or Target and buy a t-shirt, but I don't want just a blue t-shirt, I want a blue t-shirt with some vintage lace on it or something that makes it individual or special.

Tamera shops to construct a unique individualistic identity. She appreciates things that are different. She calls them “one-of-a-kind,” which seems unlikely considering that most of the things in secondhand shops were at one time or another mass-produced. However, Tamera has an eye for things that are handmade and individually designed. Most often this is not clothing, rather it is secondhand house wears and décor.

Most recently, Tamera, shared with me a pair of placemats that that she found at a secondhand shop. They were white with handmade lace around the edges. In the middle was a heart with initials stitched in needlepoint. She paid about six dollars for both placemats that probably were one of a kind. Tamera assured me that she was going to remove the initials and then make them into a pillow or preferably attach them to the

bottom of a skirt. Tamera is not afraid to have a vision for things in secondhand shops. She knows when she finds quality and is not afraid to buy it and then put it to work in her wardrobe or home. Not only does she find unique things, but she also makes them into even more unique expressions of herself. By shopping secondhand and finding one-of-a-kind things to which she assigns an importance in her life, she is giving her “treasures” new meaning by making them into new things entirely (De Certeau, 1984).

By remaking secondhand goods into new garments or goods, secondhand fashion exemplifies the melting of old into new that characterizes liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). As old goods get reconstructed and readopted into someone else’s life with new meanings and uses, the old never really disappears. Secondhand fashion will always be material from retail consumption. It is only transformed in appearance, use, and meaning. I argue that secondhand goods become further removed from liquid modern norms as they move into new contexts and uses, becoming further removed from their original contexts. What I mean by this is that reconstituted secondhand goods do not enter back into retail situations and their meanings are no longer governed by brands or the venues through which they are sold. They are made into new objects that individuals assume control over. This distinction is important as it demonstrates that secondhand goods are contextualized by the flow of liquid modernity, but are not confined to the meanings and uses that liquid modernity systems would assign to them (i.e. secondhand fashions are not waste).

The creative work that goes into using and integrating secondhand goods into one’s life is a process of trial and error, but nonetheless one that takes great effort and

skill. It is an extension of the work of hunting for treasure. The never-ending commitment to shopping appears to be the same for secondhand shopper and retail shoppers in a liquid modern world, but the work that comes after the shopping is what separates the two types of shoppers. The consumption happening within the confines of liquid modernity is much less rigorous in terms of the work it takes to bring fashions and goods into one's life. Retail shoppers do need to alter the goods they purchase because the fashion cycle tells them what to wear as time passes. Retail shoppers, who are caught up in the race to consume, do not have the time or desire to rework what they purchase because when the styles change they will just buy new ones. Captured by the flow of liquid modernity there is little or no need to do any work beyond knowing what is in style and pursuing that thing. The work is mapped out by the fashion cycle and that work in itself is all consuming. Because secondhand shoppers are removed from the work of keeping up, they are able to focus their energy on reworking what they buy, making it exactly what they want it to be. This difference distinguishes secondhand shoppers from the liquid modernity as shoppers learn to do their own work to create their identity instead of letting society do it for them through brands and current styles.

After listening to these women talk about their treasures and creativity, it has become clear that secondhand shoppers locate meaning and satisfaction in the process of locating things that suit their taste and can be used, or made into something that can be used, in their lives. To them secondhand shopping is a challenge and a labor of love. The process of digging, hunting, and finding symbolizes the balance of work and leisure that goes into their shopping. Their accounts suggest that secondhand shopping is not

necessarily about the outcome, meaning the goods one takes away from a day of shopping. Instead it is about the hunt, the treasure, and their own ability to make the secondhand garment or good useful in their lives. These shopping efforts take time, patience, and most importantly skill and knowledge. As a result secondhand shopping becomes an opportunity to strengthen these qualities and sharpen their skills as a shopper.

### **Using Secondhand Goods to Define the Self**

Treasure hunting and creativity separate secondhand shoppers from the other “unreflexive” shoppers that exist in liquid modernity (Bauman, 2007). Secondhand shoppers associate the process of shopping with their identities, qualifying themselves as expert shoppers. Secondhand shoppers learn to do their own work to create their identity instead of letting society do it for them through the presence of brands and current styles. By paving their own, creative path for consumption and identity construction, secondhand shoppers have the opportunity to create an individual look. Despite this unique facet of their identity, these shoppers are still confined to the consumer logic that governs liquid modernity. As such, the way they chose to consume and the process they endure becomes an important facet of their identity. The time and energy that goes into creating an individual look and identity is accompanied by the work of negotiating how and who to tell about secondhand shoppers’ alternative shopping habits, giving the shoppers control over how their fashion choices are read by others.

### **Opportunity for “true” individuality.**

In addition to the creativity that goes into developing a distinct look, secondhand shoppers also put effort into making their identity unique by associating with the histories, past narratives, and prior uses. Mary Ann alludes to the dual challenge of negotiating new uses and also past narratives/uses of the fashion or home goods.

**Mary Ann:** ... I bought a skirt at Nice as New that looks like it could have been at a festival I would say. Its one of those skirts you could dance in and it would completely, you know, splay out and I bought it to turn into either a table cloth or a window treatment because it had all this like amazing embroidery and bead work on it.

Mary alludes to not only multiple uses for this skirt (tablecloth, window treatment, skirt), but also its past use or meaning in a festival of some sort. Beyond the possible uses, interpreting and retelling stories about old or used goods is also part of the creativity that is put into using secondhand fashions. Although this was a rare part of my conversations with shoppers, it was illuminating to see how stories from the object’s past became a part of the new owner’s life.

When one chooses to delve into an object’s history, or even does so on accident, the owner is (in Tamera’s case) obliged to share the story with others who she thinks would be interested (e.g. those with a respect/understanding of secondhand fashion).

**Tamera:** It (secondhand goods) is a record of history and its very fun to educate your self a little bit and kind of know what’s what (grasping at her neck). Oh, I don’t have it on. I wear a necklace a lot that has a little um figurine on it that I



initially thought was a wax stamp, a wax seal. It is a fourteen karat gold watch fob and it's very intricately made with fret work, curved fret work, that my mother found at a garage sale for 25cents. And it is so cool. So there are a lot of things from, if you will, the old world. Um, my mother has things that say made in occupied Japan. I have things that were made in Czechoslovakia, which doesn't exist. Some things from the Russian block countries. So there are timeless things. My mother just went through some of her old books and just found a Julia Child's first cookbook that was autographed by Julia Childs and her husband. And she pays 50 cents a book.

The goods and their stories become a part of the shopper's life, as Tamera demonstrates the ability and desire to seek out historical and personal ties. Shoppers incorporate these goods into their lives and use them to construct an identity that demonstrates an awareness of the object's past or, in Tamera's case, historical knowledge. In this way, a dialogue is fostered between the shopper and previous owner or historical value of the object. "Blurring perceived boundaries and facilitating the capture and domestication of the perceived Other such that the Other in some way invades and inhabits the Self even as it is appropriated" (Love & Kohn, 2001, p. 53). The shopper and new owner of the product adopt the foreign story and object, facing the task of integrating it into her life (or dissociating). Through this relationship the past of the object and the voice of the owner speak together; they enter into a conversation (Silverman, 1994). "...These objects interact with them (their owners), creating a dialogue, and how this interaction can change the ways they construct themselves, their identities, their realities" (Love &

Kohn, 2001 p. 52), but this takes effort from the owner to creatively integrate the stories that they wish to help contour their identity into their lives.

Secondhand garments and goods are unique and exotic, appearing to be particularly powerful in shaping distinct, individualistic identities that could not be produced by purchasing brand-new, mass-produced fashions, accessories, or home goods. Secondhand shoppers' identities are enhanced and made more interesting by the integration of these unique goods into their lives. Secondhand goods also provide an opportunity to be different than garments and goods consumed in retail venues, as they lack the narratives that have developed and become attached to secondhand goods. Furthermore, these narratives allow secondhand shoppers to create unique identities that retail shoppers would not put the effort or time negotiating. Nor would they want to because they subscribe to a bigger, more homogenous narrative of consumption that encourages consumers to be unreflexive (Bauman, 2007).

### **Super shoppers.**

The secondhand shopper is a practiced, well-educated shopper. Secondhand shopping takes practice and an awareness of the choices available in quality, price, and venue. The necessity of having knowledge about fashion and shopping is the aspect of secondhand shopping that makes it a skill. Secondhand shoppers proudly communicated their education in two ways. First, they knew what to look for, including quality construction techniques such as seams, fabric, also wear and tear. Secondly, these shoppers knew where to shop. They had a circuit of secondhand shops where they knew they could find quality goods that suited their taste. They have (in their own way)

perfected the art of consuming. Mary Ann, who began secondhand shopping as a result of her mother's love for antiques, shares her secondhand education with me. She remembers and still participates in intense searches through secondhand shops to find things her mother can resell in her antique booths. It was during these trips that Mary Ann learned how to be a secondhand shopper and how to apply her own knowledge to the hunt. Mary Ann proudly boasts her shopping skills that qualify her as a successful, skilled secondhand shopper.

**Mary Ann:** ... I can turn a piece of clothing inside out and tell by the seams, you know, how well it's made. And then obviously you can look at the fabric and you can tell on a lot of the secondhand pieces if its been washed a few times you can see the um, the pilling. Obviously, if its already pilling then you know that's a pass, so you know the ones that are still in good condition and have their shape and form.

Mary Ann highlights the knowledge of construction and quality that is essential in the realm of secondhand. Tamera, one of Mary Ann's shopping companions, offers an explanation of the knowledge that is necessary to navigate the secondhand scene.

**Tamera:** ...this kind of shopping is a matter of educating yourself and many people buy clothes so they have something to wear. I buy clothes for their self-expression. Uh as I said...and I do the same thing in my house. Uh and so the difference between a Goodwill and a Junior League um store would be a lot more inventory, lower prices, but fewer treasures. In a Junior League ilk of store things are going to be on hangers, separated by size by color sometimes so that, you

know it's a lot, a quicker glance in a Goodwill you are going to find things in every price category...

Tamera knows where to go, what to look for in which places, and how to approach the hunt for treasure in different secondhand venues. In this narrative Tamera mentions self-expression as an important facet of buying clothes, which speaks to the importance of not only knowing where to shop but also what to shop for. Tamera has a good idea of who she is and how she wants to present her unique identity, which allows her to be a more skilled shopper. She knows her personal style and where she can find things that will express it.

These shoppers have demonstrated that consumption is a practiced and necessary skill (Bauman, 2007). However, secondhand shoppers' skill is more than making good choices, according to the mass-produced goods society offers. Instead, the skill involved in secondhand shopping is about the timeless knowledge of quality and construction. Shoppers' identities are constructed through their ability to act as discerning consumers, what they buy is secondary. Although secondhand shopping, like all consumption, is a skill necessary for survival (Bauman, 2007), it is a much different type of skill, one that is not taught in magazines, advertisements or society in general. Instead, the skill of secondhand shopping is passed along by word of mouth among women and founded on personal taste and creativity as each of the shoppers explained at the beginning of this chapter. Secondhand shoppers are more educated than liquid modern shoppers who do not take the time (nor do they have the time) and effort to become educated about the clothing beyond brands and current style (Bauman, 2007).

Secondhand shoppers use what they know to find good deals or treasures, which also contribute to secondhand shoppers identities as smart consumers. The garments or goods purchased are memorabilia of a successful shopping trip and the skill of finding deals and quality. They become signifiers of shoppers' expertise and personal taste. To demonstrate this I call on an encounter (one of many) that Tamera has initiated to share her treasures with me.

Tamera called me one day and told me that I needed to stop by to see her; she had some things she wanted to show me. She had been thrift shopping over the weekend and found some great things. Her purchases were not only for herself, but she found some good buys for her co-workers/friends. When I arrived she and her co-workers put on a mini-fashion show on the sales floor at her work. Mary Ann held up a pair of brown velvet pants from Banana Republic. They looked brand new. Mary Ann could tell from the seat of the pants, claiming that often times velvet will retain marks from the wearer's sit bones. Five dollars Tamera said proudly. Then next item was also for a co-worker. She summoned the girl from the back room and she appeared modeling a brown and green plaid wool blazer. It was also in great condition. "Twelve dollars!" shouted Tamera. Next, it was Tamera's turn to model what she had found for herself. She disappeared into the back room and came strutting out in a pair of brown fabric pumps. She called them granny pumps, but declared that they were so comfortable and coming back in style. Her eyes got big as she sang out the price, "\$10!" Finally, she shared with me some hand-embroidered placemats that cost only three dollars a piece.

In one hour, on one Saturday, at one secondhand shop, Tamera found all of these treasures. She and her co-workers were obviously pleased. I was impressed by her deals, but even more excited by the fact that she wanted to share them with me. I felt I was becoming an insider as these women were sharing their shopping habits, their treasures, and most of all their desire to brag about their shopping accomplishments—a topic that is often taboo with many women who may find buying pre-owned goods repulsive. This experience makes clear the pride that comes with secondhand shopping as one successfully gets deals and goods that others are astounded by.

Also an indication of a secondhand shoppers' identity is their ability to save money in comparison to what they would have spent had they been regular retail shoppers. Mary Ann and her mother, who shop together often, normally get things with the original price tag still attached. This allows them to compare how much individuals who shop retail would have paid. Mary Ann appeared embarrassed about her mother's ritual of adding up their savings. She crossed her arms across her chest and leaned forward, laughing intermittently as she spoke, a stark contrast to her bubbly demeanor, which incorporated an array of hand movements. She rolled her eyes as she spoke.

**Mary Ann:** And then the deal, I'll just say this—once we get home we have to do the math and you have to try everything on. There is this big horrible event where you have a fashion show and then guess what you paid for it, do you know how much money you just saved?

This is Mary Ann and her mother's way of deciphering exactly by how much they outsmarted the "system" as Mary Ann later called it. Making these comparisons pits

secondhand savings against what they could have spent and what others did pay in retail venues. This contrast highlights the importance and thrill of saving money in secondhand shopping. Mary Ann and her mother in particular, feel smarter than retail and those who shop it.

Shoppers are sometimes more proud of the bargains they found and the money they saved than what they actually purchased. Secondhand shopping often becomes more about the deal and savings as a way of constructing identity than the brands, labels, and current styles. Even in Amy's case, where she cares a great deal about the brand and prefers to keep her secondhand shopping a secret, the discount still defines her in that she could not have obtained luxury garments without it. In a liquid modern world where consumers are concerned with brands, secondhand shoppers are purchasing the same high-end brands for very low prices, using the brand and the price they paid for it to express their skill and ultimately identity as a shopper. In this way, their identities are different from other shoppers who pay retail prices willingly. Finding hugely discounted, high-quality fashions is one way they construct their identities as expert shoppers, who are able to reflect on the worth, value, and practicality of how, where, and on what they spend their money.

### **Managing identity.**

Secondhand shoppers also use secondhand goods to create their identities socially in a number of different settings. In many situations it is not even necessary for individuals to communicate the part of consumption that defines them the most—their unique shopping habits. This is particularly interesting because without conversation

about secondhand garments, where or how they were purchased is not always visible or recognizable to others. As a result, secondhand shoppers often have the opportunity to choose in whose company and in what situations they will associate with the secondhand culture. Essentially, they have the opportunity to negotiate whether they are viewed as unique, thoughtful shoppers or appear as unreflexive liquid modern consumers who are ahead of the style pack in the race to consume.

Mary Ann prefers to avoid discussions of her shopping habits altogether unless she is positive that the person she is talking to is also an experienced or at least curious secondhand shopper. She explains why she feels this way and in doing so outlines some of the negative perceptions that individuals have attached to secondhand shopping.

**Mary Ann:** If somebody else enjoys it as much as I do --like Tamera--Yes! we absolutely (talk about the treasures)...guess how much I paid for it. You know and in terms of how unique is it, how trendy, or unused and you can still wear it. I mean obviously she has been wearing things forever, I mean 20 plus years, so you know then she gets a kick out of it, so then you'll really get into the details with someone like that, but if they don't really have an appreciation for it, then why bother? Um, yeah, most people think that the secondhand stores and consignment shopping is pretty uncool and gross and kinda dirty...Because its been worn... but if you walk in a place and its not sorted and completely organized, it offensive to most people and a huge turnoff...Umm, when I mentioned thrift store shopping to other people it was always "I would NEVER



do that if its not retail or not brand new. I would never wear something that had either been worn before or in a dirty store.”

Mary Ann discusses the stereotypes and misconceptions that often come with talking about secondhand shopping. Mary Ann suggests that others view secondhand shopping as “uncool and gross and kinda dirty,” which I interpret to mean out of style (uncool), unfamiliar (gross), and soiled by previous owners (dirty). These are presumably the things that make people leery about the practice of secondhand shopping. She also admits that she only ever shares her secondhand purchases with other secondhand shoppers, avoiding sharing her good finds with anyone who may have negative feelings toward her shopping habits.

Knowing all of the stereotyping that is attached to secondhand shopping, these women still choose to take part in it. They only catch is that they have to censor their conversations about their shopping habits. Tamera tells about the two different types of responses she gets from people with whom she shares her shopping secrets. She begins with a smile and as she progresses to tell how some people respond negatively to her shopping habits she twists her face up in disgust.

**Tamera:** And I don’t always tell people, “Oh I got them for \$20” because it depends on what role you’re playing in a certain setting. Other times I love to tell people, “do you like my purse? Oh, I got it for four dollars it has never been used.” And, you know, it depends on who my audience is and who I’m talking to. A lot of times they’ll say “oh my gosh, where?” and other times they’ll go “oh its used.” And um it’s all about, you know, people are uncomfortable.

Tamera recognizes that is not acceptable to talk about her shopping habits with everyone. She has learned that talking about secondhand shopping is something that needs to be negotiated according to setting, company, and possible responses. She describes two ways that others respond to her shopping practices, explaining that not everyone is comfortable with the concept of owning and using pre-owned goods. Tamera has developed the skill of reading others when it comes to their response or the appropriate time and place to talk about the secondhand. She exercised this skill at a gala she attended. One of the elite with whom she was conversing asked her about her shoes.

**Tamera:** Someone asked who made them. I lifted my heel up and Charles Jourdan, made in Paris was exposed. But you know when you're in a professional setting at, you know, a very elite party—heavens no. I want them to think, you know, they were thousands of dollars (laughing). But in other settings its like the most fun of shopping and I mean it's the most fun part of it is to come to show someone, look at this.

Tamera controls the information she offers to individuals, manipulating what others think of her or at least her social status. She does not want to tell everyone, but admits that sharing good deals is ideal.

Like Tamera, Amy enjoys making others think that she paid a lot of money for things she found in a secondhand shop, with no desire to share the deal she got on the garment. When she shops, she shops with the intention of fitting in with the wealthy. She is very dependent on brand and explains a situation where she feels that the secondhand could be especially useful in helping her identify with an elite group (Davis, 1992).

**Amy:** Actually, this has never happened to me but its very revealing of me, personally. If I'm among a crowd, I used to work for um a private collection (art) and we'd have the ladies who lunch; and that's where I knew that there was real stuff (designer goods) in Denver. Well, I actually worked in another shop, too where people would come in with Birkin bags. I didn't even know that that was in Denver. And if they complimented me I would never tell them (I got it secondhand). I would say like, "thank you" because I want their approval....

Amy purposely hides the fact that she occasionally shops secondhand in order to appear to be something she is not. She did not offer up any instances where she was certain she would share that she utilized secondhand shopping. Whereas Tamera feels the best part of secondhand shopping is telling others about the deal she got, Amy sees the benefit of secondhand shopping to be that she does not have to tell anyone that she got a deal. She wants the elite to think that she can afford to dress like them.

Being able to manage one's identity according to what information one reveals about their shopping habits is a powerful tool. These women are able to manipulate how others perceive their identities by the information they share about their shopping habits. In this respect, secondhand shopping becomes not only a way of creating a unique identity, but also a way of disguising their unique identity when they encounter others who would not understand. Secondhand shopping, the process and the goods, make shoppers identities malleable from context to context. This power and shoppers' ability to use it demonstrates that although secondhand shoppers may be different, they are still living in and adhering to liquid modern expectations to an extent (Bauman, 2007).

## **Evaluating the Importance of Process over Product**

Secondhand shopper's expertise is rooted in their ability to manage the process of consuming, including where they shop, how they locate goods to consume, how much they pay for those goods, and also how they use them. All of these elements compose what I refer to as the process of consumption, the effort and journey one takes to find goods to consume and then put to work in their lives. This process becomes more important than the products or goods that are being shopped for. It is the process that these shoppers use to demonstrate their shopping skills, taste, and identity, rather than only the product.

Mary Ann admits that shopping different than the majority of consumers is a part of the satisfaction of secondhand shopping. She actively thinks about how she is consuming in a way that is different than what society prescribes for her as she shops secondhand shops. Mary Ann shrugs her shoulders, smiling a somewhat sly smile. I can tell she is satisfied, but hesitant to share this part of her shopping ritual with me.

**Mary Ann:** It's kind of nice to outsmart the system. It kind of feels like you're doin' that and when, especially when it's new for me and its never been worn to pay, you know, quadruple that in retail and if you can get it for less and it still fits and it does the job then you feel like you somehow beat some system. You don't have to go retail, you know, you can still get the mission accomplished without, you know, draining your account, so.

Mary Ann voices the reflexivity that she and the other shoppers practice when shopping. She knows that buying used goods is not accepted or encouraged in liquid modernity, but

other ways of shopping seem nonsensical to her. She feels this way because she takes time to reflect on the constant change and flux in liquid modernity and then chooses to consumer for different reasons. Her focus is on being true to herself not worrying about keeping up with the race to consume.

## **Conclusion**

These shoppers are different than the typical liquid modern consumers, in that they work to distinguish the process of consumption from the race to consume the fleeting fashion produced by the fashion system. They do this by giving a unique meaning and approach to consumption. They define their consumption by the opportunity and effort involved in finding goods or treasures. Secondhand shopping is not easy because good buys are often not obvious or declared to be of worth by societal norms. Seeing worth in secondhand goods is a creative process, as shoppers decided how to incorporate these goods into their lives and make them into new styles, assigning them new meanings and uses. Secondhand shoppers then use the process of secondhand shopping and incorporating secondhand goods into their lives to define themselves as they associate with the narratives that may be attached to them. They also construct their identity by associating with and conversing about their expertise in shopping. They manage their identities through how they shop and whom they tell about it, making their shopping habits unique and their identity truly individualistic.

Secondhand shoppers are destined to make choices that are also limited by what is available, but the choices they make are not necessarily because of brand or current societal norms (Bauman, 2007). Their individuality does not look like everyone else's

and it is certainly (and most importantly) not achieved in the same way. These women are aware of the liquid modern conditions they live in that encourage consumers to be unreflexive, and they choose to practice reflexivity in the process of consumption. They consider value, personal taste and needs, quality, and practicality. Furthermore, they make their own choices from what is available, but have the option to make it into a brand new choice through their own creative capabilities and how they integrate them into their lives. It is the shopping process and opportunity that shoppers create that make them expert consumers and individualistic at the same time.

## Chapter Four: Discussion

Both owners and shoppers are aware that the shopping they promote and support is an anomaly in a society that is founded on the consumption of new goods at a rapid pace. They not only recognize the race to consume, but also take care to remove themselves from it by shopping differently, for different goods, and by creating possibility for relationships to form in the midst of consumption. Karen expresses her desire to buy different, higher quality fashions but to remove herself from the race of constantly having to consume. She begins listing the reasons why she is attracted to secondhand fashion, separating herself from the majority of shoppers.

**Karen:** One. I like buying high quality clothes. Two. I don't necessarily like fashions that change from year to year. I don't necessarily want to be on the cutting edge of the department store fashion. Um, I like things that are somewhat traditional looking. Um, I like nice fabrics. I like high quality; I like well-made clothes. I like details. I used to do some sewing myself and I like really, really nice sort of like hand picked edges on wool suits. And things like that, I really like that kind of quality. And, and so I can, I can find them at places like that (secondhand shops) and don't spend a lot of money.

Jennifer acknowledges similar points as she explains what appeals to individuals about her shop, but she talks the most about the relationships that are formed in her shop. She says that they are what really keep shoppers interested in her shop.

**Jennifer:** I mean for me it's just amazing how many people touch my life and how many lives I'm able to touch... There's just, there's certainly greater thing and I recognize that people come here because—they could get used clothes anywhere—but they come here because they can't get what I offer anywhere else or very few places.

The “greater thing” that Jennifer is talking about is the connection between people that is greater than consumption. She, along with all of the owners and shoppers interviewed for this project, portrays secondhand fashion and shopping as a unique, complex, rich place for social interaction and social commentary on the norms of consumption and fashion.

In this chapter, I synthesize what I have learned from the shop owners and shoppers, demonstrating the ways that secondhand culture is unique. I pick up where I left off in Chapter 3, beginning with the prospect of secondhand shopping as different than other types of shopping, specifically a counterculture. I then explore secondhand fashion as a *tactical* form of resistance from the owners' as well as shoppers perspectives. Next, I discuss the implications of secondhand fashions and stigmas that situate it within society and as a means of consumption. Finally, I argue that secondhand shopping offers a productive model of consumption that has the potential to help individuals manage and remain in control of consumption by becoming reflexive consumers.



### **Turing capitalistic norms upside-down.**

Conversing with owners and then shoppers, I found it interesting to compare and contrast what they used secondhand shopping and fashion for and what benefits they associated with this approach to consumption. It became clear that the owners had a great appreciation and commitment to cultivating relationships in and through their shop. As you may recall from Chapter 2, they demonstrated a tendency to put their customers ahead of potential sales by being honest and concerned about their customers' satisfaction. However, shoppers mentioned almost nothing of the relationships experienced while shopping. In fact, most of the shoppers declared that consumption was an activity of solitude with the exception of mothers and daughters and, on occasion, close friends. Tamera did not hesitate in her response when I asked her with whom she shops.

**Tamera:** I definitely shop alone. Um when I'm with someone else. When I am shopping like this with someone else it is very distracting. Like I said this is kind of like recreation or therapy for me and I'm kind of a loner.

There is a distinct difference between how shoppers and owners perceive the importance of relationships in the context of secondhand shopping. Shoppers prefer to shop alone, without distraction, while owners relish the connection they have with shoppers. This shift in roles defies the traditional narratives that circulate in capitalism. Rather than shoppers being victims of consumption and the self-interest of shop owners and businesses, owners have demonstrated an interest in shoppers' satisfaction than their own financial success.

**Ella:** You know I don't need a dollar that bad to tell somebody that (that something unflattering is flattering). I don't want them going home and going "That lady LIED to me." You know so... Um, you know, we don't need dollars that bad.

Although Ella puts people before consumption, the shoppers interviewed for this project seemed to be more self-interested and solitary shoppers. Based on my observations it is important to note that it is likely that shopping is an equally social activity. However, the limited number of shoppers included in this chapter did not express its social aspects. In my observations the interest in cultivating a relationship between shoppers and owners seemed to be reciprocal. There is room and willingness to maintain personal relationships and interest in shop owners. I experienced shoppers coming in to secondhand shops anxious to share personal information with the owner like the details of building a new house or what their children are up to. Owners tend to remember the details from past encounters, knowing what questions to ask to demonstrate interest and commitment. Ella admits that it's the stories she remember, even more than the names, "I can't tell you her name. I would introduce you, but I don't know her name. I know her whole story. That's what I remember." This interest in shoppers, whether or not shoppers reciprocate it, challenges the accepted narrative of capitalism and role that producers and consumers are supposed perform within capitalism.

The narrative of enlightened self-interest is one way that society situates consumers as the weak and victimized individuals in society. Adam Smith paints a clear picture of the motivation of producers and consumers in capitalistic structures as he

writes about the invisible hand and the commitment to self-interest before the interests of others (Werhane, 1991). He addresses the greed that often drives business interactions, creating monopolies and causing the standards that businesses are able to offer to employees and consumers to decline (Werhane, 1991). In this model, businesses and the social norms that organize and support them are framed as powerful and manipulative in order to achieve the greatest gain and to become economically successful. Consumers are the victims in this traditional narrative of capitalism. Although capitalism brings choices to consumers, these choices are limited and predetermined. As Bauman (2007) suggests choice does not equal freedom. Consumers are subject to the trends, products, and meanings assigned by the capitalistic system to goods. Consumers are similarly victimized in Bauman's (2000) theory of liquid modernity, as they become the targets of and energy behind the race to consume all that life and retail have to offer. He situates consumers as relatively helpless in a fast-paced consumer culture where individuals become victims of perfectionism that is founded in societal expectations.

In the model of secondhand shopping, business operators, who may also be considered producers of commodities (not so much the actual commodity but their meaning), appear to be putting their interest in other people before their own financial gain. They are not on a quest to achieve a monopoly in the industry or sell shoppers things that will not serve their bodies and lifestyles just to make a sale. Consumers are not victims of consumption, but instead are recipients of care, compassion, and honesty. If any victimizing is occurring in this model, it may be that shoppers are victimizing the owners by taking advantage of their low prices, often waiting for them to go lower, and

possibly ignoring owners attempts to form meaningful relationships. Beyond striving to get the lowest price, shoppers also seem to be less concerned with (but not totally disinterested in) the friendship that shop owners offer to their shoppers. In any case, the secondhand shop owner's role in the narrative of capitalism and liquid modernity are drastically different than traditional understandings of economics would suggest. Whether shoppers' role is transformed into one of self-interest in secondhand shops is debatable, but it is clear that in the realm of secondhand they are not victims as they are in liquid modernity. As the narratives of capitalism are challenged by the secondhand culture, it is worthwhile to consider whether or not secondhand culture can be considered a counterculture.

### **Counterculture**

Fiske (1989) suggests that all commodities emulate the ideology of the system from which they were produced. This means that secondhand fashions are still embedded in liquid modernity, as this is the system they were produced in and for. However, I argue that secondhand shops reproduce the fashions they house through shop owners, who strive to construct a new ideology in response to the norms of liquid modern consumption. Instead of secondhand fashions as commodities that work to "naturalize the capitalistic system," I argue that secondhand shops, fashions, shop owners, and shoppers work to denaturalize liquid modern, capitalistic norms within their shopping environment (Fiske, 1989, p. 14). Like a pair of jeans that has been worn out with use but is still worn, discouraging its wearer from purchasing another pair of new jeans, secondhand fashion abates the need to buy new fashions that directly support brands and

corporations (Fiske, 1989). On the other hand, it is important recognize that secondhand fashion in some cases circulate and support brand labels by making them accessible to a wider audience. In any case the choice not to buy new products is culturally (and to a small extent economically) alternative in the sense that the owners of these personalized or reconstructed commodities are making the choices concerning how to use these garments. In doing so they are moving the garments into a subculture, which redeems a portion of the power that defines the commodification process (Fiske, 1989). As Fiske asserts, “It is a refusal of commodification and an assertion of one’s right to make one’s own culture out of the resources provided by the commodity system” (p.15). Secondhand uses the fashion that has been produced in liquid modernity to create an alternative culture defined by the secondhand ideology outlined in Chapter 2.

The resistant culture that is developing in secondhand shops and through the shoppers who use them is an important part of popular culture. In this case, I mean popular culture to be “the art of making do with what is available” (Fiske, 1989, p. 15). However, in making do by crafting alternative uses and meanings for commodities, individuals run the risk of eventually being consumed by the dominant culture, diminishing it as a resistant force (Fiske, 1989). Ella, in particular, expressed this as she recognized that a few of her younger shoppers were using her shop to obtain expensive, high-end purses, not even considering any of the other goods in her shop. It is this type of shopper who victimizes the owners by poaching on the select high-end goods that move through the shop. They have little concern or appreciation for secondhand culture. Although some shoppers use the secondhand to try to keep up with the flux in a liquid

modern world, the regular audience of secondhand shoppers does not seem to be too concerned with the race to consume. Popular culture becomes a constant struggle between being a dominant force in culture and being dominated by a larger, more powerful system (Fiske, 1989). In secondhand shops there is a vacillation between dominance and resistance, as liquid modern standards threaten to leak into the operations of secondhand shops via consumers who only value certain brands and ignore the experience of secondhand shopping. Secondhand shops are a clear example of this reliance on capitalistic structures to supply their inventory, but once they have the fashion in their shop owners' construct new meanings for them (explained in Chapter 2).

In the world of fashion, it is almost impossible to have counter-fashions or anti-fashions because they are still a form of fashion. It is also likely that whatever is initially considered to be counter to the fashion industry eventually moves into the mainstream, becoming an accepted and even popular fashion style (Wilson, 2001). Nothing is ever totally outside of or counter to fashion; almost all fashion movements are subsumed in or accounted for in the fashion system giving them little chance to maintain their resistant message. Once alternative dress is recognized as a form of fashion, the garments move through the fashion cycle eventually going out of fashion (Davis, 1992). Secondhand fashions are unique, however, because they have already traveled through the fashion system. They are situated as waste in society, runoff from the liquid modern turnover that governs goods and identities. Yes, fashions come back into style, but this cycle is a long process that takes many years (Davis, 1992). When fashions do return to popularity they are often altered enough that the old fashion being replicated is just different enough

to still be out of style. As such, secondhand fashion is different than the ragged pair of jeans that Fiske (1989) suggests can be adopted by the dominant system through the mass-producing of ragged jeans, lessening their power to be resistant. A business cannot reproduce secondhand fashions because they appear most often to be the same as they did when they were sold the first time with the exception of minimal wear. Secondhand fashions cannot be subsumed by the liquid modern system of consumption they have already passed through. Selling and wearing these fashions as if they still had identity-constructing power is therefore a bold move of resistance. It seems to be immune to being accepted by liquid modernity or reintegrated into the fashion system without being reworked into some visually new fashion.

In making this claim, I realize that some secondhand garments are classic or timeless and are often re-circulated in society. Amanda explains,

**Amanda:** Yeah you know and those are like super classic clothes so like those defiantly have more of a life than you know like other labels by, I mean those will be in style for ten, fifteen years where other labels are dated in a couple years.

Although owners and shoppers both spoke to the possibility of finding timeless fashions, these classic fashions are often basic staples, like black dresses, a tailored suit, or a white blouse. Timeless fashions often need to be mixed with more fleeting fashions to spice them up or make them more interesting and personal. In this respect, timeless pieces are still affected by the fleeting themes of fashions that dictate changes in fabrics, fit, and quality. Even classic secondhand fashions are not always reproduced in a society of consumers. In fact, some classics may even function similarly to antiques, which are

discussed later in this chapter. In this case, timeless pieces are not re-circulated as fashion, but as a historical piece of fashion and something of great value.

From the same perspective the act of secondhand shopping seems to have a different place in the dominant system of liquid modernity. The act of secondhand shopping goes in and out of vogue, according to Ella who recalls, “I would say its been maybe ten years that this has become and in vogue way to shop...It is more acceptable.” It seems, however, that secondhand shopping goes in and out of vogue as a resource for maintaining or perpetuating liquid modern tendencies to consume labels and brands (even though this is not its purpose). Its popularity is not a result of the type of fashions sold in secondhand, rather the practice of secondhand shopping. In other words, secondhand shopping is appealing to liquid modern consumers only in that it is a potential source for high-end brands that will aid them in keeping up with the race to consume.

Karen hesitantly mentioned that she thought secondhand fashion was a counterculture, but what she describes is more of a subculture, a group with deviant, but not totally different beliefs or interests than consumer culture at large (Fiske, 1989). Specifically, a subculture is a, “distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product, class, brand, or consumption activity” (Shouten & McAlexander, 1995). Subcultures also demonstrate a unique set of values, beliefs, rituals, and symbolic expression (Shouten & McAlexander, 1995).

**Karen:** So, its part of this overall maybe not a true counterculture, but kind of counter culture where you don’t want to spend, you know, you don’t want to be involved in, you know, that whole consumption thing at the same time but you



want to have things you like. And so it is kind of a subworld—not subworld—counterculture, it is a counter culture there is a way in which it's challenging the dominate culture and the price of things without going to Walmart, which I couldn't do.

Karen still enjoys shopping and consuming but in a more informed, responsible, conscious way than liquid modernity would suggest. However, her commitment to secondhand shopping is not a commitment to a counterculture. It is too similar, too connected to the dominant systems of production and consumption. That being said, there is an element of resistance that is worth considering as shoppers and owners challenge the norms of the dominant system, which I have framed as Bauman's (2007) liquid modernity.

Although secondhand shopping and its fashions are alternative choices in a society of consumers, secondhand shoppers are not attempting to start a consumer revolution. Often the shoppers consider secondhand shopping and the objects they purchase a secret. Their goal is not to reform how others shop; their satisfaction is internal and does not need to be voiced to others who will oppose their choices. It is not for everybody and owners and shoppers do not want it to suit everyone. Thus, secondhand shopping is better described as a subculture.

## **Resistance**

As a subculture, secondhand fashion does have the potential to function as a form of resistance. Secondhand fashion and the shops where it is sold are embedded in the traditional, capitalistic fashion system that operates in liquid modernity, yet secondhand

shoppers and shops offer a new perspective on how it should operate. Secondhand fashion makes consumption/shopping its own, giving the fashions associated with the power of creativity, individuality, and the possibility for dissent in identity construction. Secondhand shopping, for both shoppers and owners is, I argue, a form of resistance. I am aware that from a Marxist perspective that secondhand fashion is ingrained in the circuit of production/consumption and its goal is merely to survive in this system by making money (Balibar, 2007). I also understand that Marxists believe that the inability to change the system is failed resistance, which would mean that because secondhand culture does not strive to replace consumer culture it is giving in (Balibar, 2007). However, I argue that there is value in reframing secondhand operations as a form of resistance. De Certeau (1984) theorizes resistance as a matter of how objects are used in the context of everyday life. De Certeau (1984) suggests that resistance is possible in the manipulation of objects' intended uses to fit one's own needs/desires. Looked at from this perspective, secondhand fashion can resist in its operations and uses of consumption/production through the meaning that is assigned to the material goods.

### **Creating a culture of resistance.**

For shop owners, their shops are a place where they are in control. They make the rules that determine prices, how shoppers are treated, what fashion means (to an extent) and what is and is not acceptable for and in their shops. Using the secondhand ideology outlined in Chapter 2, owners are creating an environment that is counter to other retail venues, whether it be TJ Maxx or a department store. They employ the secondhand ideology with the intention of creating the opportunity to connect with their shoppers.

They create relationships that encourage the shops' sales associates to be honest and take time to interact with shoppers about their bodies, their tastes, and their lives beyond matters of consumption. Not only is this counter to traditional retail situations, but it also resists the concepts of liquid modernity. Secondhand shops tend not to perpetuate the race to stay ahead of the style pack, instead encouraging women to formulate personal style, lasting relationships and even a sense of community. This may not always be the case, and it is important to remember that secondhand shops are still a business trying to make a profit. However, the effort to shift the focus from the race of consumption to personal style and relationships is certainly visible when one is shopping in secondhand shops. At the same time shop owners maintain, as liquid modernity would encourage, a value of individuality. However, even the owners' commitment to help women develop their individuality is resistance, because it is a different type of individuality. Rather than encouraging shoppers to participate in the race to consume brands for "individuality's sake" (or the exercise individual choice), shop owners encourage individuality through creativity and attentiveness to each woman's individual body and needs.

Although secondhand shops successfully create their own unique place in society where they appear to have control over how consumption is enacted, they are not *strategic* in their resistance. Because secondhand shops are still governed by the ebb and flow of capitalism and liquid modernity, secondhand shops are not totally free of the greater systems and power in society and have not achieved a permanent place in consumption (De Certeau, 1984). Furthermore, secondhand shops willingly accept their place in the fashion system, as they proudly claim to sell the latest fashions. It is from

their place within the capitalistic power that governs society that they create a distinct space for consumption that is resistant to the impersonal and detached norms of retail operations. Thus, secondhand shops can be classified as *tactical* in their resistance, meaning that it is resistance that exists undetected by the larger system. It is not affecting the larger fashion system directly, but it is speaking out against capitalistic norms. De Certeau (1984) describes tactical resistance as, “an art of the weak” (p. 37). Tactics are performed in the space of the other. In this case, the resistance that is secondhand shopping is preformed within the confines of liquid modernity—it cannot stand alone.

### **Consumption as resistance.**

Even considering these elements of resistance, secondhand shoppers are consumers in a liquid modern world. In fact, they are some of the best, most practiced consumers I have ever encountered. They know how to shop, where to shop, and what qualifies as a treasure. Their shopping habits are embedded in liquid modernity’s call for individuals to be skilled consumers, as they put effort into and are proud of their ability to make good, valuable choices via consumption. In this way, secondhand shoppers are the epitome of liquid modern consumers who have chosen to commit to a life of consumption (Bauman, 2007). Secondhand shoppers further enter in to liquid modernity as they recognize the need to negotiate how their fashions and home goods appear to others. By not revealing their shopping habits to other liquid modern consumers who shop retail, secondhand shoppers are succumbing to the pressures of liquid modernity. They are trying to appear as if they are with or even ahead of the style pack (Bauman, 2007), even

though their shopping habits are alternative to most liquid modern shoppers' approach to consumption.

Despite their mastery of consumption, secondhand shoppers are resisting many of the norms of liquid modern consumption. They turn to secondhand shops to resist paying high prices for nice goods. They also enter an environment where the possibilities are seemingly endless, considering the potential for different combinations and uses for garments and goods. These shoppers are challenging a society where, "What is counted is what is used, not the ways of using" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 35). Shoppers get a certain satisfaction from shopping "under the radar" and having others think that they are participants in the race of liquid modernity even though they are consuming what a true liquid modern consumer would consider to be outdated. They, as De Certeau (1984) would say, have located the "cracks" in the system of consumption and production. They are resisting the movement and flux of liquid modernity by purchasing items that are being phased out of popularity, often keeping them for longer than one season.

This is an expression of *tactical* resistance as shoppers resist without intending to change the larger system of capitalism. It is also tactical in the sense that one cannot usually tell a secondhand shopper from another type of shopper by looking at them out of a secondhand context. As such secondhand shopping only resists consumer culture in certain contexts and when it is put in juxtaposition to the norms of consumer culture, which shoppers have control over most of the time. In this case, "Resistance is understood where it takes place," meaning that it is not present in every context and becomes more (or less obvious) depending on the circumstances and spaces in which it

appears (Pile, 1997, p.3). However, the internal knowledge and satisfaction of secondhand shoppers is what sets them apart and allows them to *tactically* resist, making a verbal statement to those who respect their choice or concealing it totally to others who would judge this practice as ineffective consumption or identity maintenance. De Certeau (1984) recognizes this form of resistance as new stories are written and embraced.

Only the effects (the quantity and locus of the consumed products) of these waves that flow in everywhere remain perceptible. They circulate without being seen, discernible only through the objects that they move about and erode. The practices of consumption are the ghosts of the society that carries their name. Like the “spirits” of former times, they constitute the multiform and occult postulate of productive activity. (p. 35)

Secondhand garments purchased and presumably worn by shoppers are the ghosts of society that “move about and erode” the meanings and values of current, fleeting styles that are purchased from retail settings, for outrageous prices and an abbreviated life span. Although secondhand fashion as a form of resistance is non-obvious once it is recontextualized in society, it matters because secondhand shoppers know that they are stepping outside of the norms of liquid modernity and given the right opportunity will share this satisfying secret of resistance with others confined to liquid modernity.

### **The Older the Better**

As I worked with the shoppers and even the owners for this project my eyes were opened to the expansiveness of the secondhand. My initial focus was fashion and

accessories, but Tamera reminded me that even antiques were secondhand goods. I failed to consider this initially because there is little or no stigma attached to antiques. In fact, antiques are often treated with respect as individuals make antiquing a hobby that demonstrates know how and acumen for good value. Shopping for antiques is even considered a quest for cultural capital and a signifier of social mobility (Palmer & Forsyth, 2002). It demonstrates an appreciation for the history and the art of past times, cultivating respect for antiques, their sellers, and their shoppers. The practice, time, and knowledge needed to shop for antiques are similar to what is required of secondhand shoppers to shop for pre-owned fashions, but how they are viewed is different.

It is worth considering antiques in this conversation because they are a unique part of secondhand culture and help to situate secondhand fashions in society. Although secondhand fashions and antiques are perceived differently in society, they are both secondhand goods. Examining why the two types of goods are perceived differently and have different meanings illuminates how and why secondhand culture is and is not integrated into mainstream consumption habits. By valuing the sport of shopping for antiques, the spirit of secondhand fashion is also accepted. In exploring the realm of secondhand through antiquing, I aim to demonstrate what makes secondhand culture acceptable and even desirable in a society. I also use antiques to demonstrate that secondhand shopping for fashion is a unique approach to consumption, even as it compares to other opportunities to consume secondhand.

### **Using vs. wearing the secondhand.**

Antiques are often considered to be furniture, which is less personal than the fashions that adorn the body and may explain why there is no stigma attached to them. It is much different to set your orange juice on a table that belonged to another family for 50 years before you got it, then to put on fashions that graced the personal space and contours of another's body. Fashion is more personal than furniture because it moves through life with its wearers. However, antiques can be fashions and accessories, too. Hats, jewelry, scarves, coats, dresses etc., are also found in antique stores and are often purchased with pride and accompanied by a willingness to talk about their history and previous owners. In this case, age becomes an important source of meaning for the antique fashions and accessories. Age allows antiques to appreciate in value, but causes fashion to depreciate. This may be a result of the narratives that are attached to goods as they continue to age. Even if they do not have a particular narrative attached, antique goods map out a progression of time and human tradition.

### **Accumulating narratives is valuable.**

Another thing about antiques is that they are usually around for quite sometime, at least 25 years and some are even older than 100 years. As they continue to survive the years, antiques accumulate more and more narratives that make the objects more complex and possibly more exotic as they move from place to place and person to person. In this way, they function more like a souvenir of others lives and adventures that the current owners did not necessarily experience. The owners of the objects can usually acquire a



date and bit of history about the antiques they purchase that they can later share with others who see the object in their home or who will later own it (Love & Kohn, 2001). As Tamera suggests antiques are, “a record of history and its very fun to educate your self a little bit and kind of know what’s what.” This is not always true of secondhand clothes, or antique clothes (if there is such a thing), as they deteriorate surrendering their delicate fabrics and construction to time, they not only lose their use value but also the narratives that may have been attached to them.

In secondhand shops I experienced the beginning of attaching narratives to fashions as the owners negotiated the stories they heard from their consignors, deciding when and with whom it is appropriate to share these stories. For example, Ella’s decides to share that a garment was owned by a famous opera singer. However, even Ella explains that secondhand fashions are not as valuable as antiques, “ like Antiques Road Show and everybody thinking that they had a million bucks in their attic or something...” With this comment Ella also highlights how individuals think that fashions have the potential to be similar to antiques, but without the same history or value .

Although antiques are part of secondhand culture, they are very different from secondhand fashion. In many ways antiques are the opposite of secondhand fashions. Where secondhand fashions do not accumulate meaning or value, antiques become more and more valuable and are constantly developing new narratives. These differences in goods within secondhand culture suggests that fashion really is fleeting and short-lived. It is not necessarily secondhand culture that is rejected by society, rather it is the concept of reusing and recycling particular goods. Fashion is not made to be permanent and the

stigma society attaches to using secondhand fashions maybe a way of maintaining its impermanence even in secondhand. Maintaining impermanence in meaning and the respect it receives in a society of consumers strengthens secondhand fashion as a form of resistance. Because fashion's meaning can be changed, and has to be changed in order to remain relevant or acceptable to consumers, it becomes less clear in its message, which gives the power to assign meaning and value to individual consumers as they refashion old clothes. In very few instances is fashion's meaning developed and built upon like an antique's meaning. It is the development of meaning and value that appear to make antiques desirable; their meanings may be complex but at least they are somewhat more concrete. Without this characteristic secondhand fashion remains a form of resistance, because its meaning is so easily manipulated. The goods of secondhand culture play a large role in determining what is and is not a resistant consumer practice. As a result secondhand fashion is resistant because of its uncertain meaning, its flux, and its impermanence, which opens up possibilities for resistance.

### **Managing Inescapable Consumption: Reflexive Consumers**

Bauman (2007) suggests that consumption is inescapable and all consuming, permeating every nook and cranny of our lives. As a result, consumption is inescapable; humans are never going to get rid of consumption so they have to learn to accept it and live within it. Bauman (2007) also claims that consumers are unreflexive, or uninterested in the consequences or implications of consumption in their lives. Liquid modern consumers are only interested in the instant gratification and the potential of keeping up with the style pack by consuming the "right" things. However, secondhand shoppers are

an example of what a reflective consumer may look like in the midst of liquid modernity. They consider the narratives attached to garments and goods, create new uses for old objects, and they find way to work their unique shopping habits into liquid modernity. Secondhand shoppers reflect on how goods and fashion supplement their lives and how their shopping habits communicate a different approach to consumption.

With the acceptance of consumption as a part of life, I argue that humans can learn to manage it better. Instead of buying into the race and allowing consumption to, in essence, consume people, secondhand shopping illuminates the opportunity that consumers have to control consumption. I argue that secondhand shopping offers a model to work from when dealing with consumption daily life. Secondhand shopping reframes consumption, while still allowing it to exist as a prominent part of human lives and experiences—the difference is, is that it is productive and reasonable. Consumption in the three shops represented in this study is manageable and collaborative, not overwhelming and solitary as Bauman (2007) observes. These shops serve women (in particular) by encouraging them to value lasting style over fast-paced consumption and relationships more than fashion. These shops demonstrate how consumption can operate without inciting a life-long quest for perfection through consumption. If humans have to deal with consumption then secondhand shops seem to have developed a great way to do it.

There are three specific ways in which secondhand shopping models what it means to be a reflexive consumer. First, *secondhand shopping has the ability to take the emphasis off of brand as an effective way to become an individual or create a unique*

*identity*. Secondhand shoppers know that the choices they make matter, but they also know that the choices they have made can be valuable and meaningful for years. Secondhand shoppers are secure with their choices for longer periods of time because the focus is shifted from brand to creativity and development of personal taste. When consumers are reflexive about their finances and lifestyles they are able to thoughtfully create a truly unique, individual identity that suits their lifestyle and body. When secondhand shoppers do utilize brands they do so with knowledge of the quality and that they are getting a good deal. They enjoy brands beyond the name on the label and do not become wrapped up in the brand as a status signifier. They are not fooled by the illusion that a brand can contribute to their individuality. Instead, they accept the challenge to create their own individuality.

Secondly, *the ability to look to the self as an authority on identity, rather than societal norms or expectations, grants shoppers greater agency in the rapid change that liquid modernity tells them should guide their lives*. As secondhand shoppers, the women in Chapter 3 are able to reflect on their personal tastes and lifestyle needs instead of looking to societal norms or expectations. It is in this knowledge that these women make purchases that are appropriate for them. If they do not see what they like or want they make it happen by reworking it. Their understanding of shopping and use of goods is an expression of themselves that takes work and thought, independent of societal standards or trends. Shopping can be about individuals, when they are able to take control of it and manage it for their own purposes.

Finally, *secondhand shopping demonstrates how relationships and consumption can exist in harmony with one another*. There is little competition and a lot of collaboration between shoppers and also between owners and shoppers. Secondhand shoppers and shop owners demonstrate a reflexiveness in the moment of consumption that allows them to evaluate relationships as more important than consumption. It is possible to step back from the act of consumption, to understand the situation and context one is shopping in. Once one steps back from their consumption habits a larger world comes into view where other people are not commodities, but opportunities for sincere connections.

It cannot be ignored that even secondhand shopping is dependent upon the capitalistic operations that keep fashions flowing in and out of style. It would never work if everyone chose to shop secondhand, because there would be no inventory flowing into the secondhand shops. Secondhand shopping and the consumption it promotes is dependent on individuals who are caught up in liquid modern norms of consumption. If it were not for them secondhand shoppers would have nothing to shop for and no one to distinguish themselves from. That being said, I am not suggesting that all consumers become secondhand shoppers, but shopping in a secondhand shop like the three I worked with—even if it is just once or twice—is a worthwhile endeavor because secondhand shops without hesitation call their shoppers into its ideology. All shoppers or lookers are treated with respect and sincere interest which is a pleasant surprise considering that most individuals are used to the disconnectedness and insincerity that unfolds in most of life's opportunities for consumption.

## Discussion

### Key points.

From this study there are three main points that I believe are important in the discussion of consumption in liquid modernity or otherwise. First, *consumption is pervasive, but how one views it and deals with it can be negotiated*. Just like individuals have a great deal of choice in what they consume, they have choices in how and why they consume. Capitalistic structures try to provide choices for consumers in this realm, too, but ultimately consumers have the power to decide what it means to be a consumer. This gives consumers power beyond just making choices about what products, brands, or goods they consume. Ultimately they get to develop their own reasons, meanings, and uses for what drives their personal consumption. Choice may be confined to consumption, but what one chooses matters and has the power to situate consumption within their lives as opposed to situating one's life in consumption. As such, individuals can take control of consumption. In secondhand shops, especially, this control can even open up space for resistance, but knowing that the choice of why and how to consume is available is the first step in taking control of consumption.

Secondly, *secondhand shoppers have reflexive tendencies, distancing them from the "unreflexive" consumer*. The way secondhand shoppers shop is satisfying and their satisfaction is often not fleeting. They reflect on what it is that will serve them in their lives, how they will obtain it, and what it is that the fashion they consume means to themselves and others. In doing so they situate themselves as expert shoppers, but do so consciously and as individuals. The way they understand shopping and use it to

distinguish themselves from the average liquid modern consumer is the result of a great deal of thought and effort. They share their knowledge about shopping because they know it makes them different from other shoppers, classifying them as informed experts of consumption. Being reflexive puts the consumer in control of consumption instead of vice versa because they are able to use consumption for their own purposes and recognize the constraints in a society of consumers. Although it is not possible to escape liquid modernity, secondhand shoppers offer a way of orienting oneself to liquid modernity that matters to them and makes a statement in liquid modernity that is different and individualistic.

Finally, *the process of consumption matters*. How one consumes gives consumption and the goods purchased meaning, personally and socially. In liquid modernity, consumers are focused on what they have to show for their consumption—products matter, the process does not. Secondhand shoppers are exactly the opposite. The goods they find are an opportunity to share how they got them and recall the skill and effort that went into finding them. The process defines secondhand shoppers and what goods mean. In liquid modernity the process of consuming is not valued. People are encouraged to consume to get particular items that are in style, but how they get them is irrelevant and unconsidered. However, I would like to suggest that the consumption process of the liquid modern consumer also matters but because it is not reflected upon by liquid modern consumers it does little to define to help the shopper define herself or the goods she purchases. Focusing on how to make choices and be a consumer, rather

than what choices to make appears to be a way to make consumption less daunting and more productive and practical.

### **Communication.**

Because secondhand fashion is not valued as an approach to consumption in liquid modernity, secondhand shoppers have become reflexive consumers in order to make pre-owned fashion relevant and meaningful for themselves and others.

Communication and rhetoric play a large role in secondhand culture's ability to support reflexive consumers in two ways. First, *the communication that takes place in the environments for consumption influences how consumers shop and understand consumption*. The communication that unfolds in secondhand shops influences how shoppers and owners view the fashion in and beyond the shop. Consumption is an act that every individual must do, but rarely are we asked to reflect upon what it means or exactly how it operates in our lives. However, this is a conversation that is subtly unfolding in secondhand shops. Secondhand shoppers collaboratively define what it means to be a consumer in a world where prestigious brands, constant turnover, and tiny sizes dictate what one shops for or what standards one holds oneself to. Secondhand shoppers and shop owners are aware of these standards, but they also contest them by recognizing that being unique is not about brands, turnover is not an indicator of style, and everyone's bodies are different. It is this conversation that unfolds in secondhand environments (and possibly beyond) that make fashion meaningful and encourage further reflection on the role that fashion/consumption will play in daily life. By communicating



about the norms of consumption while consuming, secondhand shoppers create a new reality where consumption is more liberating than constricting.

*Secondly, the rhetorical context of fashion, as well as how shoppers choose to communicate about secondhand fashion and the process of obtaining it, situates it as a form of a resistance.* Communication makes the items humans consume meaningful and relevant. How consumers communicate material's meaning is altered by the contexts that frame the consumption of that material. Secondhand shops take fashion out of its original context where brands and companies had greater control over their meaning and display. Secondhand shops recontextualize fashion in a new place that makes them more accessible, less intimidating, and blends them with an array of styles and brands. This shift in physical context makes consumers do more work when shopping as they hunt for treasures and see possibility in discarded goods. In this way, secondhand shoppers are encouraged to be reflexive shoppers, who consider the potential of secondhand goods and are attentive to the process of consumption. Shoppers make secondhand fashions meaningful and relevant by how they communicate (or do not communicate) their shopping strategies and reflexivity to others, in addition to how they visually rework past fashions. They use communication (verbal and visual) as a tool for negotiating what fashion means in different contexts, taking advantage of its transient nature. Communicating about the reflexivity, including context, the process, and the work that goes into secondhand shopping, is what makes secondhand fashion meaningful and potentially resistant to consumer norms.

### **Limitations.**

As I worked my way through this project I became aware of some unforeseen limitations to the venues and individuals I had chosen to work with. There are three main limitations that prohibited me from seeing the secondhand culture more clearly. First, this study is limited in the type of shops I selected. I stumbled upon one tier of their hierarchical arrangement of secondhand culture and believed that it would represent secondhand culture as a whole. However, I quickly learned that this was not the case. Many different types of individuals use many different forms of secondhand culture to obtain goods that help them live a certain lifestyle and create a certain identity. By leaving out the other levels of secondhand shopping, I was unable to see the ways fashion is distributed in the secondhand industry and how secondhand shopping may be carried out differently in these environments and settings. I was also unable to understand the niche market that the three shops I worked with were catering to.

Secondly, this study only accounts for a few women, who are relatively homogenous as far as race, socioeconomic status, and education. By focusing on women who were all very similar, I was unable to explain why and how individuals use secondhand shopping as a resource of true necessity. On the other end of the spectrum I am unable to account for the wealthier secondhand shoppers who may use secondhand shops for different reasons and even in similar ways as liquid modern shoppers use retail. In only focusing on the middle class secondhand shopper, I am not able to speak for the whole of secondhand consumers. For example, I am unable to say whether or not men or

men and women from lower or higher socioeconomic positions practice reflexivity as utilize secondhand shops.

This study is also limited in that I did not interview any shoppers who were against secondhand shopping to get their perspective on this unique habit of consumption. As a result I am unable to speak with certainty that liquid modern consumers are all that different from secondhand shoppers. Although secondhand shoppers have their own ideas about retail shoppers, I am unable to confirm or explain that they are in fact opposites. It is very possible that there are some retail shoppers who practice reflexivity (but perhaps in a different way). The perspective of consumption represented here is solely that of secondhand shoppers, limiting the weight of the claims secondhand shoppers and myself make about retail shoppers.

#### **Future directions.**

This study just grazes the surface of secondhand culture. The secondhand culture is much bigger than the secondhand shops in Denver, Colorado. As I talked with shoppers and owners I realized that there was even a higher tier of secondhand shops that catered different, wealthier women. And of course there is a plethora of lesser “thrift shops” that are also secondhand. This massive network of resale shops mimics the hierarchy of high fashion and low fashion that is present in the traditional fashion system. It would be worthwhile to consider how this system of secondhand shops maps onto (or does not map onto) the traditional fashion system. Attention to this hierarchy, that was undetectable until I became immersed in the culture, may illuminate how these shops

work together or compete with one another. Ultimately, this may offer insight into resistance or dominance on a larger scale.

In terms of communication, this study highlights the opportunity to explore consumption as a form of communication. I was fortunate to have worked with reflexive consumers who could explain why and how they consume in relation to other ways of consuming. It would be interesting to get the other side of the story by interviewing people who fit the description of Bauman's (2007) unreflexive consumer to see what they felt or intended their patterns of consumption communicated for them. Exploring the dominant methods and reasons for consuming and how they feel about secondhand may provide greater depth to the issues of resistance and dominance that are evident in secondhand culture.

## **Conclusion**

In liquid modernity, individuals are caught up in the race to consume as they strive for perfection that will never be achieved (Bauman, 2007). Often liquid modern consumers accept the role that liquid modernity places them in, taking an unreflexive approach to consumption. However, not all consumption or consumers are the same. There are opportunities and individuals who are able to concurrently embrace and take control of consumption, reflecting on the choices that are available and what will serve them best. Secondhand shopping is an experience that encourages consumers to reflect on the liquid modern norms and fosters a different type of consumption that encourages a commitment to the self and others that is valued more than what one chooses to consume. Shopping in a way that disregards the fashion that capitalism suggests is relevant and

desirable, opens up the possibility to control what consumption means, how it is done, and the role it plays in one's life. Escaping pervasive consumption is impossible, but managing it is not. Secondhand culture offers a glimpse of what it looks like to consume reflexively, putting consumers in control of what their choices mean, how they are used, and the process through which they are attained.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Semi-structured Interview Schedule for Owners**

#### **Role in fashion industry.**

- How do you define secondhand fashion and how did you come to this definition?
- What is secondhand's relationship with traditional fashion cycles/systems?
- Does your shop play a role in the fashion industry? Can you describe that role?
- What does your shop offer to consumers in terms of style?

#### **Background.**

- What is your history/past relationship with clothing?
- How do you use secondhand fashion?
  - How did you develop a customer base?
- How have you made your shop to be different than other secondhand shops in the area?
- Would you say that your shop is a brand? Can you describe the brand/essence of your shop?
- What does a good customer look/act like? Can you describe their habits?
- What do you feel this store does for consumers? What role does it have in their lives?

#### **Goals.**

- How do you want people to use your store?
- What do you want consumers to get out of your store?
- Ideally, how do you want people to view/treat the brands in your shop?
- Can you describe what a successful day for your store looks like?
- Can you describe a day that you personally would consider a success?
- Why do you think people chose to come here?
- What are they looking for?
- How does the shop fit into people's lives?
- Can you please talk about some relationships you have with buyers and sellers?
- What do people tell you about your shop?
- Do you have regulars? Describe what a regular does? Who are they?
- What is your ideal audience?

#### **Memories and stories.**

- What are some of your most memorable moments in operating a secondhand store?

- What are the pros and cons of your job?

**Follow-up interview with Ella.**

- What is your “spring event”?
- Could you please talk about the individuals who attend this event and their purpose?
- Can you describe the experience you want individuals to have during this event?
- How is this event different from everyday shopping that takes place in your shop?

**In our last interview...**

- In our last interview you told me about a woman who came in to your shop who was a bit overweight and she really made an impression on you because she loved her body. Have you had any other encounters that stuck with you like this one did?
- I know you have a lot of new, high-end garments in your shop with the transition to spring. Have you had a lot of greedy or inauthentic (as you called them last time) customers come in?
- I know you were concerned with TJ Maxx shoppers hurting your inventory. Did you notice this during spring collection?
- When clothing comes into your shop from consignors, do they usually have stories to tell about the garments?
- Do you share those stories with your customers?
- Do the clothes in your shop have meaning to you and/or to your customers? What are those meanings?
- Can you describe a particular way that you try to make shoppers' experiences to Mercer Place special or memorable?

## **Appendix B**

### **Semi-structured Interview Schedule for Shoppers**

- To begin, could you please tell me a bit about where you shop for your clothing?
- How long have you shopped at consignment shops?
- Tell me about why you shop at consignment stores in general?
- What is consignment shopping? Can you compare and contrast consignment shopping with shopping for new things and/or thrift shopping?
- Which are you favorite consignment stores in the Denver area? Why?
- Do you usually shop alone or with friends? How much time to you spend on an outing to these shops? Why?
- What counts as a “good/successful” shopping experience for you?
- What does secondhand fashion do for you? How do you use it?
- What are some of your most memorable moments in operating a secondhand store?
- Is there anything I should have asked that I didn’t? Is there anything else you would like to share with me on this topic?

## **Appendix C**

### **Ethnographic Interview Themes for Shopping with Shoppers**

- Memorable shopping trips
- Uses for purchases
- Where to shop and why
- What is a good find?
- Strategies and processes
- Sales